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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 6 July 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Passport Application Processing

1. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of the passport application processing service for people in Wales. [900867]

4. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the time taken to process passport applications for people in Wales. [900870]

5. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of the time taken to process passport applications on people in Wales. [900871]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Passport applications from Wales may be handled at all Passport Office processing sites throughout the UK. Between March and May, 98.5% of UK applications were completed within the published processing time of 10 weeks.

Mr Dhesi: This Conservative Government are presiding over backlog Britain, with never-ending travel chaos causing misery and havoc for hard-working people's holiday and travel plans. Many of my Slough constituents have been waiting not weeks but months for their new passports to arrive. I know it is a similar story for the good people of Wales. Can the Secretary of State clarify how many of the promised 1,700 new members of staff the Government have actually recruited to deal with the crisis?

Simon Hart: I should add, for anybody who has an interest in this particular subject, that if there are individual cases that are clearly being badly held up, they should please pass them on to the Wales Office and we will do whatever we can to expedite the service. In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, 850 additional staff have been brought on since April 2021, with a further 350 arriving this summer.

Chris Bryant: I simply do not believe the statistics the Government keep on giving, and I think the Secretary of State should push back on them. I have 30 cases outstanding and more coming in to my office every single day of the week. The team in Portcullis House used to be five people, but is now only three, so there is

less of a service. Members of staff have to queue for two and a half hours to be able to deal with a single passport case. I have people who have been waiting for 14 weeks, some who have been waiting for 18 weeks, children who have been waiting for 14 weeks—this is simply incompetence. When will the Government get a grip of it?

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman knows that every MP has examples of their own. I can only restate what I said just now: where there are individual cases, we are very keen to help. Some 98.5% of applications are being dealt with within the timescale. I realise that for the people who are not in that particular bracket it is intensely frustrating, and it is frustrating for Members across the House. The situation continues to improve, but if there are ways we can help the hon. Gentleman and his constituents I am very happy to do so.

Alex Davies-Jones: Like other Members, I have an inbox full of hundreds of constituents struggling to get their passports. Some are waiting 15 or 18 weeks, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said. Those people are already struggling with the cost of living crisis, they are having to fork out for the cost of passports, and now they are losing out on their vital holidays, which they have been desperately waiting for for more than two years. What support is available for those people? What economic redress is available? What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the Prime Minister—or is he too bothered with propping him up instead of dealing with people's actual issues?

Simon Hart: As the hon. Lady knows, we in the Wales Office have conversations with all Government Departments, especially on this particular issue. Staff numbers are being increased and the pace at which applications are processed continues to improve: it is at 98.5%. I realise that for people not in that bracket, this is a tough challenge, and I can only repeat what I have said in answer to the hon. Lady's colleagues: if there are individual examples we can help with, we are very happy to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Jo Stevens.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We are all quite surprised to see the Secretary of State here this morning, but perhaps he cannot leave the disintegrating Government because his passport application is stuck in the queue. People across Wales are sick and tired of the Government's incompetence. Can he explain to my constituent Jamie Dunkley and others across Wales why their Welsh language passport applications have been sent to Peterborough for processing, causing huge delays, stress and additional cost?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady raises an interesting question; this is the first I have heard of it, to be honest. As I keep saying, at the risk of being boring, I am very happy to look into that if it is causing undue delays. Those can also be resolved by the same means I suggested earlier.

Infrastructure Investment

2. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support infrastructure investment in Wales. [900868]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): This Government are committed to levelling up across Wales. That is why we are investing over £340 million in Welsh rail and £120 million through the levelling-up fund in Wales in round one alone, and Wales will benefit from the UK-wide £5 billion Project Gigabit to connect hard-to-reach premises.

John Lamont: It is of the utmost importance that every part of these islands can enjoy investment from this United Kingdom Government. Can the Secretary of State update the House on what he and the rest of the Government are doing to achieve that aim in Wales and across the whole United Kingdom?

Simon Hart: I found it quite hard to hear my hon. Friend's comments, but I can say that we believe there are really positive steps in terms of sustainable job creation in Wales through the various different funding measures, in particular the UK's shared prosperity fund, which is currently in lift-off. Levelling up is devolution in action. We get a lot of criticism from the Opposition Benches about the Welsh Government's being bypassed, but we are going to 22 local authorities and stakeholders in a way that has never previously been done.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The Global Centre for Rail Excellence that is being developed in Onllwyn in Neath will become the first and only rail infrastructure testing facility in the UK. It recently secured a memorandum of understanding with an Association of American Railroads subsidiary, US venture MxV Rail, to work together to advance global rail research and technology. The Welsh Labour Government have provided £50 million. When will the UK Government provide the £30 million they promised so that this world-class rail facility can be completed by 2025?

Simon Hart: I am delighted that the hon. Lady raises that absolutely perfect example of the Welsh and UK Governments working in tandem, creating new, innovative, sustainable jobs in her constituency and in adjacent areas. It is a £30 million investment and I am delighted that she is welcoming it in the way that we should be.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Select Committee, Stephen Crabb.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): At the end of the Great Western line in my constituency is Milford Haven, the UK's most important energy port and the largest town in my constituency. Its railway station is a disgrace. Does the Secretary of State agree that a project to upgrade Milford Haven train station would be an ideal round 2 levelling-up fund bid, and will he look favourably on any such bid from Pembrokeshire County Council?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend and neighbour has raised the question of Milford Haven station a few times, and I am no stranger to it either. Although I am not allowed to express a preference for individual levelling-up bids, that is precisely the type of infrastructure

improvement bid that the levelling-up fund was created for, so if he and the local authority can put together some compelling evidence, I am sure that those who are in a position to judge it will look on it favourably.

Mr Speaker: I call Jo Stevens, shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Perhaps the Secretary of State ought to tell the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) that he cannot put in his levelling-up bid because the Government portal has broken down. Despite Ministers' promises on supporting infrastructure investment in Wales, we all know that the reality is very different. He will not challenge his Government's sleight of hand in denying the consequential of £4.6 billion to Wales from HS2, nor the annual £150 million hit that that will have on the Welsh economy. Because of his Government's spending review, the Welsh Government's capital budget will be 11% lower by 2024-25 compared with last year—less money, less infrastructure. Instead of focusing on media appearances defending his indefensible boss, when will he focus on doing his job for the people of Wales?

Simon Hart: It is telling that the hon. Lady did not mention the increasing levels—the record levels—of investment that the UK Government have made in Wales, which, from £16.7 billion in 2021, will reach £19.08 billion by 2024-25. Whichever areas of investment we look at, despite her claims to the contrary, they are considerably greater than they have been at any time since the devolution settlement, resulting in extra jobs, extra investment and extra reasons to celebrate what Wales has to offer. It is profoundly depressing for people who are looking to the Opposition for inspiration on investment in Wales that all we get is a litany of negativity.

Mr Speaker: I call Liz Saville Roberts, for Plaid Cymru.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Birmingham, Crewe, Derby, Doncaster, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and York: that is the shortlist of cities for the headquarters of Great British Railways. The Secretary of State failed to get a single Welsh location as a candidate. Is he not embarrassed at his dismal track record in Cabinet despite being a loyal Government spokesman?

Simon Hart: I love it when the right hon. Lady, who is so determined to separate her country from the rest of the UK economy, lists a whole lot of stations and locations in England. There are either separatists or Unionists and I never know with her which side she is batting for. This is about our delivery in Wales, because in a sense she is asking me to choose between the Welsh Government and the UK Government. I am very proud to be part of a Government who have produced £121 million-worth of levelling-up funds, £46 million-worth of community ownership funds, £585 million-worth of shared prosperity funds, the floating offshore wind potential of the Celtic sea, the potential for nuclear at Wylfa, project Gigabit, Airbus investment at Broughton—the list goes on and on. All we get, as I said to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), is negativity.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Secretary of State defends an infrastructure that is extractive for Wales and brings nothing back. Time and again, the Secretary of State has been rolled out to defend the indefensible on behalf of the Prime Minister. The outgoing Children's Minister said that he

"accepted and repeated assurances on Monday to the media which have now been found to be inaccurate."

Two Cabinet Ministers have gone and the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary has gone—it is not business as usual, is it? When will he be going?

Simon Hart: I thank the right hon. Lady for that tempting question. It is business as usual in the Wales Office, and that is why I am proud to repeat what I said just now: we are getting on with the levelling-up fund, the community renewal fund and the shared prosperity fund. We have investment across every part of Wales, and despite all her protestations, there is so much evidence that being part of the Union is part of the success of Wales in creating sustainable, long-term jobs. I dearly wish she would come and join us in the endeavour to improve the life of people in Wales, rather than using cheap political opportunities to do the opposite.

Cross-border Healthcare

3. **Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with the Welsh Government on the adequacy of cross-border healthcare provision. [900869]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The UK Government will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that everyone across the UK gets the healthcare they need. There is a memorandum of understanding with the Welsh NHS, which has been essential in resolving a number of long-standing issues over patients' rights across the border.

Craig Williams: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) is to the left of me. We have been working hard to try to get the Welsh Government and the Department of Health and Social Care together to talk about ambulance times. My constituents are suffering, because if they get into a Welsh ambulance or an English ambulance, they still go to the same district general hospital in Shrewsbury. Will the Minister pull together the two Governments to talk about ambulance waiting times in Shrewsbury?

David T. C. Davies: I would certainly be happy to write to the Department of Health and Social Care. I am afraid that I am not responsible for the Welsh Government, but I would be pleased to see them working harder to ensure that patients in his constituency get access to the healthcare they need. For 21 years, the NHS in Wales has been run by the Labour party, and one in four people are now waiting more than 12 months for treatment, and that is an absolute disgrace that Opposition Members are responsible for.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a bit farcical to be asking questions of Ministers when we have no idea whether they will still be at the Dispatch

Box by the end of the day, but I will give it a go. Those in Wrexham need to get easily to Clatterbridge Cancer Centre in my constituency for specialist cancer care, and at the moment it is too hard because of the quality of public service. Will the Minister, before he leaves—maybe he is going to stay—give my constituents and people in north Wales an update on progress on the Wrexham-Bidston railway line?

David T. C. Davies: The Wrexham-Bidston line is one of a number of lines that are being looked at, including the south Wales relief line and the north Wales coast line. The reality is that constituents in Wales are fed up with having to wait more than 12 months for treatment, and the reason for that is 21 years of Labour Government running the NHS in Wales. Their record is an absolute disgrace.

Cost of Living

6. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on providing support with the cost of living for people in Wales. [900872]

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the cost of living support for households in Wales. [900874]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): My ministerial colleagues and I fully accept that there is a cost of living challenge, but this country has faced some exceptional challenges over the past few years, including a global pandemic and a European land war. We have responded vigorously by providing £37 billion to help households across the UK through these challenges.

Theresa Villiers: Does the Minister agree that the best way to help people in Wales with the cost of living is to deliver our long-term plan to grow the economy, increase productivity and reduce people's taxes?

David T. C. Davies: I agree completely with my right hon. Friend. Households across the whole United Kingdom will be receiving a cost of living support payment worth £650 this month. By contrast the Welsh Labour Government want to spend £100 million to increase the number of Welsh Senedd Members. Some people believe in levelling up, but I am afraid that Opposition Members believe in leaving people behind and spending more money on further politicians.

Mr Hollobone: Across the UK, 8 million low-income households will get £1,200 in financial support to help with rising electricity and gas bills. Would not the £100 million being spent by the Welsh Government on extra politicians in Cardiff be better directed at helping those families?

David T. C. Davies: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Not only will households receive an extra £1,200, but next week, 8 million households on means-tested benefits will get an extra £326 in their bank accounts; in September, 6 million people on disability benefits will receive a £150 payment; and in October, £400 will come off households' energy bills. There is much more to follow, because the Government believe in levelling up, not in spending £100 million on extra Senedd Members.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In spite of parliamentary questions, we still have no answers about how people who have their permanent residence in park homes or similar in Wales, who receive their energy bills via a third party, can receive the £400 discount. Will the Minister speak to his ministerial colleagues to sort that out so that those people can receive the money in a timely fashion?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady has not actually contacted me about the issue previously, but it is a reasonable one to raise and I would be happy to see any correspondence from her on it.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Unsurprisingly, the UK Government have repeatedly broken their promises to fund Wales to the tune of nearly £800 million, and they are blatantly trying to undermine devolution at every opportunity. Can the Minister tell me how that serves the Welsh people when they are struggling with the cost of living crisis? While he is at it, can he tell us why he is still propping up a broken Government who promote an abuser and then lie about it?

David T. C. Davies: That statement is completely incorrect. Prior to Brexit, Wales received around £343 million a year in structural funds and £337 million a year was spent on agriculture. Post Brexit, the sums will be exactly the same. My question is why Opposition Members are still supporting a Government in Wales who have left us with lower education standards; lower standards in healthcare; and more taxes on business, such as a tourism tax and a tax on wine producers. Why do they now want to spend £100 million of taxpayers' money on extra politicians? Those are the questions to which the people of Wales would like to know the answers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Conservatives' cost of living crisis is hitting Wales hard. The soaring costs of energy, fuel and food have been compounded by crippling increases in tax and national insurance. The meagre 5p cut to fuel duty has proved wholly inadequate and energy costs are due to rise even further this autumn. It is clear that the Government have run out of not only ideas but Ministers. Will the Minister commit to speaking to whoever holds the post of Chancellor this afternoon about taking immediate further action to tackle the cost of living crisis?

David T. C. Davies: We have already acknowledged that there is a cost of living crisis, which was partly caused by having to spend £400 billion on getting us through the covid pandemic and by a European land war. Of course, we are doing everything we can to support people through these difficult times, which is why we are spending £37 billion on support for hard-hit households and why we have introduced a new 25% energy profits levy on oil and gas companies, which will raise about £5 billion of revenue that will also go to relieving the burden on families.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

7. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of the UK shared prosperity fund for Wales.

[900873]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues on how Wales's £585 million share of the UKSPF will level up communities across Wales. With local authorities, business, the third sector and civil society fully engaged, the UKSPF will mean quicker delivery, better targeting and closer alignment with local priorities than previous EU funding.

Sally-Ann Hart: The priority of the UK shared prosperity fund is to empower local communities, business and people, with the funding for delivery going directly to local authorities in Wales. Can my right hon. Friend outline the steps he is taking to work directly with local communities in Wales to ensure the delivery of local priorities, and the benefits that that will bring to people, communities and businesses in Wales?

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend makes a good point about devolution. Of course, it frustrates Opposition Members that we are taking devolution to its literal limit as far as the funds are concerned; we are going to 22 local authority stakeholders across Wales. I find it absolutely perplexing that for some reason, the Welsh Government think that devolution stops in Cardiff and simply do not trust 22 democratically elected local authorities spread across the whole of Wales to make sensible decisions on behalf of their constituents.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Given the timescale involved, there is a lot of concern among local authorities in Wales that moneys allocated under the shared prosperity fund will not in fact be spent by them, and the money therefore will be clawed back by central Government. Will the Secretary of State say that that will not happen?

Simon Hart: I got the gist of the hon. Gentleman's question. Of course, the shared prosperity fund is an absolute cast-iron commitment. It has thousands of jobs at its disposal. We think it has great potential across the whole of Wales and we are very happy of course, if he has individual examples that concern him, to address them.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Welsh Government wasted close to £5 billion of the former European aid in west Wales and the valleys. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give me that the UK shared prosperity fund will reflect UK priorities, working with local authorities in Wales—in all of Wales—to ensure that places such as the Vale of Glamorgan benefit, having been excluded by the former European scheme?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend puts his finger on exactly why the levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund are so vital. What they do is go straight to local communities. This allows them to make bids and decisions on behalf of their constituents, residents and ratepayers in a way no other scheme has previously enabled them to do. That is why this is innovative and will lead to sustainable jobs.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): What type of shared prosperity is it when the UK Treasury plunders capital investment programmes in Wales by refusing to let contractors use red diesel instead of white diesel, further

driving up construction inflation to the benefit of the UK Treasury and the detriment of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland?

Simon Hart: I do not think that question has any sensible context to it, because the proposals that have been set out—by the Treasury or, indeed, through the levelling-up and shared prosperity funds—make it absolutely clear how those funds will benefit all communities in a way that they have not before. Picking specific examples and saying that this is an anomaly overlooks, I think deliberately, all the criteria that underpin the funding methods I have talked about.

Welsh Product Procurement

9. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on their Departments procuring more products made in Wales. [900875]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Yes, it says here. Welsh products and services are some of the best in the world, from Welsh steel used to build Crossrail to Airbus's cyber-security expertise and Raytheon in Broughton upgrading the intelligent surveillance capabilities of our aircraft.

Chris Elmore: Wales is being denied billions in consequential funding from HS2. Does the Secretary of State agree that, for Wales to see any benefits from the scheme, which of course needs about 3 million tonnes of steel and new high-speed trains, the Department for Transport should look to procure Welsh steel and, indeed, buy trains from CAF in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) to ensure that Wales finally benefits from the project—or is it simply that the Tories will continue to fail the people of Wales?

Simon Hart: I actually agree with a lot in the point that the hon. Gentleman raises. If he looks at some of the projects we are talking about, particularly around defence spending—£850 million of defence spending—the potential around floating offshore wind once the Crown Estate's leases are in play and the huge potential around nuclear development at Wylfa, he will see that domestic UK procurement of steel is right back on the agenda, and that will result in every steel maker in Wales benefiting.

Tourism Industry

10. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support the tourist industry in Wales. [900876]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The UK Government are Wales tourism's biggest fan, and the fact we stepped up with financial help during the pandemic and saved thousands of jobs is testament to that.

Simon Baynes: Tourism is crucial to Clwyd South, which attracts visitors from all across the world for events such as the Llangollen international musical eisteddfod, which is taking place this week. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the Welsh Labour Government's plans to introduce a tourism tax, which will do great damage to the tourism industry across the whole of Wales?

Simon Hart: I think I can do even better than my hon. Friend requests me to by simply quoting the words of the chief executive of UK Hospitality, Kate Nicholls, who said: "The tourism tax is ill thought through and proposed without any impact assessment. Welsh Government does not know why it is needed, what its effect will be on visitors and what damage it will do to businesses and jobs in a sector making up a quarter of the Welsh economy. It is unnecessary, unhelpful and ill considered." If the House does not believe it from me, it should believe it from the experts in this particular field.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On tourism in Wales, when a previous Tory leader resigned, he not only visited Wales but bought a home in Wales. Can I suggest that one way the Secretary of State for Wales could help tourism in Wales is by encouraging the current Tory leader to follow suit, resign and buy a home, although perhaps not in Wales—perhaps somewhere else?

Simon Hart: Perhaps I can encourage the hon. Gentleman to persuade his colleague in Cardiff, the First Minister, to drop his ridiculous plans for a tourism tax and for various other means of punishing successful businesses in Wales. If he did that, perhaps we could create some lasting jobs in Wales rather than simply listening to his political protestations.

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [900917] **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 6 July.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Today is a big day—[*Interruption*]*—*as we implement the biggest tax cut for a decade, increasing national insurance thresholds to make tax lower and the tax burden easier. These changes will benefit 30 million people across the UK and I am pleased to say that two of those people—Mandy Banfield and Alan Calzari—are seated in the Public Gallery. A typical worker will now save £330 per year, with 70% of employees better off as a result. That is real money for real people.

I am sure the House will also join me in wishing the best of luck to England and Northern Ireland, who are competing in the UEFA women's Euro 2022 tournament, which starts today. I am sure that they will both make the nation proud.

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

Ben Everitt: Last week, we launched a new approach to combating knife crime in Milton Keynes, which means increased use of stop and search, tougher charging and custody, tougher sentencing, faster youth diversion

and more work with parents and communities. Does the Prime Minister agree that if someone carries a knife in Milton Keynes, they should expect to end up behind bars?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing to campaign for tougher sentences and against knife crime in Milton Keynes. As a result of what the Conservatives have done, adults who are convicted of certain offences involving a knife, including threatening with a knife or a second offence of possession, face a minimum sentence of six months' imprisonment—and guess who voted against tougher sentences for knife crime?

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

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Today is the start of the women's Euros, and I know that the whole House will wish the Lionesses the very best of luck in bringing football home.

It has been 40 years since the death of Terrence Higgins. Terrence worked at *Hansard* by day and Heaven by night before he sadly died of AIDS. The Labour party and the Terrence Higgins Trust are committed to ending new cases of HIV by 2030. Together, we can.

Last week, a Government Minister was accused of sexually assaulting a young man. I want to quote the victim's account. He says: "He grabbed my arse and then he slowly moved his hand down in front of my groin. I froze." I accept that that is not easy listening, but it is a reminder to all those propping up this Prime Minister just how serious the situation is. The Prime Minister knew that the accused Minister had previously committed predatory behaviour, but he promoted him to a position of power anyway. Why?

The Prime Minister: That individual, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), no longer has the Conservative Whip. He no longer has a job. As soon as I was made aware of the allegation that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just read out—the complaint that was made—he lost his status as a Conservative MP. He is now the subject of an independent investigation by the complaints and grievances panel and that is entirely right. I want to say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that I abhor bullying and abuse of power anywhere in Parliament, in this party or in any other party.

Keir Starmer: None of that explains why he promoted him in the first place. And we have heard it all before. We know who he really is. Before he was found out, he is reported to have said, "He's handsy, that's the problem. Pincher by name, pincher by nature." Has the Prime Minister ever said words to that effect? I am not asking for bluster and half-truths—we've all had enough of that. Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to trivialise what happened. *[Interruption.]* Yes, Mr Speaker, because very serious complaints have been raised against the right hon. Member for Tamworth and they are now being investigated. It is true that a complaint was raised when he was in the Foreign Office and the matter was

resolved. It is absolutely true that it was raised with me. I greatly regret that he continued in office and I have said that before, but it is now the subject of an independent investigation and that is the right thing. Frankly, I think the people of this country would like also to hear about other jobs that are held by people in this country, not least the 500,000 people we got off welfare into work in the last six months alone. Those are things that are making differences to the lives of people up and down the country and I am proud of it.

Keir Starmer: No denial. He says the matter was resolved when he means it was upheld. And they are all sitting there on the Front Bench as if this is normal behaviour. When that young man reported his attack to a Government Whip, she asked him if he was gay. When he said that he was, she replied, "That doesn't make it straightforward." That comment will sicken anyone who has experienced sexual assault and then been made to feel like they somehow asked for it, or who worry that prejudice means their complaint will not be taken seriously. Will the Prime Minister apologise for those disgraceful comments on behalf of his Government?

The Prime Minister: I have already said that I regret very much that the right hon. Member for Tamworth continued to hold office after the complaint was made against him in the Foreign Office. It was resolved in the Foreign Office and his apology was accepted, but clearly that was not enough and in hindsight I should have realised that he would not change. However, when it came to Friday last week, and when I was given the information that the right hon. and learned Gentleman read out about the complaint that was made against the right hon. Member for Tamworth, I acted immediately and I took the Whip away from him. We will not tolerate that kind of behaviour in this or in any other party. What we also want to do is to help people up and down the country with the things that also matter to them like cutting their taxes by £330 this year, which is what we are doing.

Keir Starmer: Doesn't that just sum up the Prime Minister? Awful behaviour, unacceptable in any walk of life: it is there for all to see, but he ignores it. It was the same when his ally was on the take from lobbyists. It was the same when his Home Secretary was bullying staff. It was the same when taxpayers' money was being abused, and it was the same when he and his mates partied their way through lockdown. Anyone quitting now after defending all that has not got a shred of integrity. Is this not the first recorded case of the sinking ship fleeing the rat?

The Prime Minister: Look, the right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about—*[Interruption.]* He should hear what his lot say about him. He talks about integrity; he wanted to install the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) into No. 10. That is what he wanted to do—imagine what our country and what the world would be like now. He talks about integrity; he voted 48 times to overturn the will of the British people and take us back into the European Union. By the way, listening to his muddled speech the other day, that is exactly what he would do again. He talks about integrity, but he has voted time and time again against sanctions on criminals that would put them behind bars. This is

the Government who are tough on—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—he talks about integrity; he is himself facing a criminal investigation, for which he asked me to resign.

Keir Starmer: What a pathetic spectacle: the dying act of the Prime Minister's political career is to parrot that nonsense. As for those who are left, they are only in office because no one else is prepared to debase themselves any longer—the charge of the lightweight brigade. Have some self-respect! For a week, he has had them defending his decision to promote a sexual predator. Every day, the lines he has forced them to take have been untrue: first, that he was unaware of any allegation—untrue; then, that he was unaware of any “specific” allegation—untrue; then, that he was unaware of any “serious, specific” allegation; and now he wants them to go out and say that he simply forgot that his Whip was a sexual predator. Anyone with anything about them would be long gone from his Front Bench. In the middle of a crisis, does the country not deserve better than a Z-list cast of nodding dogs?

The Prime Minister: When times are tough and when the country faces pressures on the economy and pressures on budgets, and when we have the biggest war in Europe for 80 years, that is exactly the moment when we expect a Government to continue with our work, not to walk away, to get on with our job and to focus on the things that matter to the people of this country. So we are not only cutting taxes today, but putting £1,200 into every one of the 8 million most vulnerable households in the country, thanks to the strength of our economy and thanks to the decisions that we took, which the right hon. and learned Gentleman opposed at the time.

Keir Starmer: The only thing that the Prime Minister is delivering is chaos. I started this session with a quote from the young victim in all this—how he “froze” when he was attacked. When I was prosecuting rapists, I heard that from victims all the time. Victims said they froze because “It's not about sex; it's about power”. The power that the disgraced Government Minister had was handed to him by that Prime Minister, and he is only in power because he has been propped up for months by a corrupted party defending the indefensible. So it is no longer a case of swapping the person at the top; is it not clear that the only way the country can get the fresh start it deserves is by getting rid of the lot of them?

The Prime Minister: The difference between—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to get through Prime Minister's questions.

The Prime Minister: The difference between this Government and that Opposition is that we have a plan and they do not, and we are getting on with it. They want to focus on this type of issue; we are going to get on with our jobs. We are going to control prices by not giving in to the union barons; they are paid by the union barons and they are proud of it. We were the first European country to arm the Ukrainians; I am proud of that. Those guys, in the Labour party opposite, not only wanted to put the right hon. Member for Islington North into No. 10, but eight of them—the shadow Foreign Secretary, the shadow deputy leader and six

others—voted to get rid of our independent nuclear deterrent. Today, we are cutting taxes, we are helping half a million people into work and, thanks to the strength of our economy, we are helping people up and down the country. And we are going to continue to deliver on the mandate I was given.

2. [900918] **Johnny Mercer** (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): On Monday night, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill had its Third Reading. With it, we are at the beginning of the end of the long journey to making sure that the service and sacrifice of those who served in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Northern Ireland are not rewritten by those who seek only to line their own pockets. Does the Prime Minister agree that we can never again allow such a gulf to open up between this place and those who serve? Never again must they be made to feel that we are not on their side. Will he redouble his commitment to making sure that this is the best country in the world to serve in the military and to be a veteran or their family?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for all the work that he has done and continues to do for veterans. The Bill will give veterans the certainty that they deserve. We are fulfilling the manifesto pledge to end the cycle of investigations, but at the same time we are making sure that families can get the answers that they need about what happened to their loved ones.

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

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I give every best wish to the England and Northern Ireland ladies' football teams as they approach the Euro championship? There is nothing better than seeing your team in the final.

We commemorate the passing of Terrence Higgins 40 years ago, and of all those who have died from AIDS since then. I am sure that the whole House will also want to join me in passing condolences to the family and friends of the Scottish football goalkeeping legend, Andy Goram, who sadly passed last weekend, far too early. He will long live in memory as the best goalkeeper that many of us have seen.

It is easy to forget that only 10 days ago the Prime Minister was dreaming of a third term. It is often said that a week is a long time in politics, but it turns out that 10 days is truly a lifetime. Let us face it: it is a minor miracle that the Prime Minister has even made it through to Prime Minister's questions. He really ought to see the faces behind him. Prime Minister, it really is over.

The Prime Minister is desperately clinging on to his own fantasy, but the public cannot afford to put up with this farce of a Government a minute longer. Today we should be talking about the Tory cost of living crisis, soaring inflation and the growing costs of Brexit, but instead it is always about him. How many more Ministers need to quit before he finally picks up his pen and writes his own resignation letter? Perhaps that is what he is doing now.

The Prime Minister: Actually, I was just jotting down some notes about the right hon. Gentleman's question, which I thought was excellent when he was talking about the economy, because that is the issue that the country faces. That is where this Government are

introducing, I think, the most important decisions—helping families up and down the country, with £1,200 going into their bank accounts right now; cutting taxes for 30 million people, with a £330 tax cut; and helping half a million people into work, through the Way to Work scheme. That is a fantastic thing to be getting on and doing. That is the priority of this Government, and that is what I am going to focus on. I am glad he likes it.

Ian Blackford: My goodness! Nothing to see, we should all move on—if we live in the world of the Prime Minister.

A few weeks ago, I compared the Prime Minister to Monty Python's black knight. It turns out that I was wrong: he is actually the dead parrot. Whether he knows it or not, he is now an ex-Prime Minister, but he will leave behind two deeply damaging legacies. I hope that the dishonesty of his leadership will follow him out of the Downing Street door, but the other legacy is Brexit—and that will stay, because I am sad to say that the Labour party now fully supports it.

Scotland wants a different future, not just a different Prime Minister, so if the Prime Minister will not resign, will he call a general election and allow Scotland the choice of an independent future, free from the control of Westminster?

The Prime Minister: I noticed that the right hon. Gentleman's remark that the Labour party had given up on returning to the European Union was not greeted with rapture by the Opposition. That was because it is not true: they want to go back in, just as he does. I think that that is a terrible mistake. It would be undemocratic. As for the referendum that the right hon. Gentleman wants, we had one of them—as I have told him before—in 2014.

6. [900923] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister think there are any circumstances in which he should resign?

The Prime Minister: Clearly, if there were circumstances in which I felt it was impossible for the Government to go on and discharge the mandate that we have been given, or if I felt, for instance, that we were being frustrated in our desire to support the Ukrainian people, or over some major point, then I would. But frankly, Mr Speaker, the job of a Prime Minister in difficult circumstances, when he has been handed a colossal mandate, is to keep going, and that is what I am going to do.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Well, there you have it, Mr Speaker. Once again, the Prime Minister puts political survival before public duty. However, people can see that even if he goes—it is not an if; it is a when, isn't it?—the same Westminster arrogance will continue to dictate our futures in Wales. Does the Prime Minister want a medal for being the best recruiting sergeant for independence we could wish for?

The Prime Minister: Actually, whenever I look around the United Kingdom—I had a great talk with Mark Drakeford the other day, as well as talking to Nicola Sturgeon—I see the bonds of our Union being strengthened all the time, and I am confident that that will continue.

8. [900926] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): The Government's town centre levelling-up funds have been very successful around the country, but a few town centres, such as Waterlooville in Meon Valley, are in desperate straits and have not managed to get a scheme into the current round of funding. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that future funds will be available to help declining high streets to become fit for the 21st century and to survive post pandemic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Meon Valley, and I will ensure that she has a meeting with the Minister for levelling up at the earliest opportunity.

3. [900920] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The public clearly think that this Government have lost the plot over the cost of living crisis. The Prime Minister may be aware that the average salaries of a nurse and a primary school teacher are £36,000 and £38,000 respectively. They, and indeed working people everywhere, are struggling to pay their rents and their mortgages. Given that they can barely afford a £150,000 mortgage on a new home, can the Prime Minister tell the House how he could afford a £150,000 treehouse?

The Prime Minister: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is this. Rather than talking about fantasy infrastructure, I can tell him about real infrastructure. We are helping to unite and level up the people of this country with £650 billion of investment. We are helping people—helping to lift the aspirations and opportunities of people up and down the country. Thanks to the strength of our economy, we are helping exactly the people whom the hon. Gentleman describes, with £1,200 going into their bank accounts to help them with the cost of living pressures.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

10. [900928] **Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The Prime Minister knows that while he is Prime Minister, I want him to do all the good that he can. While he is Prime Minister of this green and pleasant land, may I refer him to early-day motion 1082, which concerns the Goring Gap, Chatsmore Farm, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the land above Goring station?

That farm in Worthing was fully protected, and it will be fully protected again when a different inspector says that Worthing Borough Council can protect it. May I ask the Prime Minister to tell the Government to withdraw their objection to the council's appeal against the absurd decision by a planning inspector to allow 482 homes to be built on the green lung between Goring and Ferring?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. He has campaigned on this issue for some time, and I will ensure that he has a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss the development in Goring-by-Sea.

4. [900921] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): On 21 January, the Government committed £100 million from the automotive transformation fund to BritishVolt for a gigafactory at Cambois in my constituency. As of today, not a penny—not a single ha'penny—has been received

by the company. This jeopardises up to 8,000 much-needed jobs. The tensions between the Prime Minister and the former Chancellor have sadly now been much exposed, and I am telling you, Prime Minister, that the betrayal of my constituents cannot be another broken promise by this Government. Prime Minister, give him a nudge. Please instruct your new bestie to make sure a cheque is in the post this afternoon, because who knows who will be in that seat this afternoon, never mind this time next week.

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the passion with which he advocates for investment in BritishVolt. I share his enthusiasm, and I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) as well. He is a heroic campaigner on this issue. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the letter was sent last night with an in-principle offer of support for that project. How about that! Hang on in there. That is what I am going to do.

12. [900930] **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The world is facing a global food crisis, in which the poorest nations face catastrophic consequences. Will the Prime Minister take all possible action to negotiate and facilitate access to the grain stores stranded in Ukraine? We have a limited opportunity to avert famine in developing nations and the UK must play its full part using all the resources at our disposal.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right. There are 25 million tonnes of wheat that are basically being held hostage by Putin. That is the equivalent to the annual consumption of many of the least developed countries, and we are helping to lift that blockade not just by negotiation but by supplying de-mining equipment, insurance for the commercial ships that might be involved and also £10 million to help improve the railway infrastructure that will be necessary to get the grain out by rail.

5. [900922] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday the Prime Minister said that he was fed up of people saying things on his behalf. It is not just him who is fed up: so are the British people, and so are his Ministers who are resigning. They are sick of being sent out by him time and again to say things that are not true. Is the real problem him, or them for believing him in the first place?

The Prime Minister: I want to be clear. What I want to say, and I say it again, is that I regret the way the appointment happened. I was clear with the House about what I knew at the time, but I want to stress that I take this matter extremely seriously. I am very sorry for the impact it has had on the victims, but the individual in question, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), is now subject to an independent complaints and grievance procedure. As soon as that began—as soon as a complaint was made, I should say—the Whip was taken away.

Mr Speaker: Let me just say that we do not know that that is the case. It is confidential, and I think we have to stop referring to something we do not know. I want to put the House on notice that we do not mention it.

13. [900931] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Just over a fortnight ago, two horrific fatal stabbings took place on a quiet street in East Barnet. With the Metropolitan police now in special measures for the first time in its history, will the Prime Minister urge the Mayor of London to start living up to his responsibilities as police and crime commissioner? The Mayor needs to get a grip on crime, give Barnet its fair share of new officers and abandon his plan to sell Barnet police station.

The Prime Minister: I notice that crime has spiked since the previous Mayor of London, and it is the Labour party that voted against stop and search and against increased funding for the police. As for the London Mayor, he would do better to get out of California and take control of crime in his city.

7. [900925] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): According to the NHS Confederation, not a single one of the so-called 40 new hospitals that the Prime Minister promised at the last election will be built by 2024. Two of those “new” hospitals are in my constituency: Hammersmith Hospital opened in 1902, and Charing Cross Hospital opened in 1818. They are not new hospitals and there is no building going on. Like all his promises, they exist only in his warped imagination. As this is likely to be his last Prime Minister’s questions, will he finally tell us the truth?

The Prime Minister: Actually, if the hon. Gentleman looks at what we have promised and what we have delivered, we said we would get 20,000 police out on the streets, and we already have 13,500 more; and we said we would get 50,000 more nurses, and we are already on track. He is quite wrong about the pledge on hospitals, as we are going to deliver them by 2030, as was always clear. The only reason we can do that is because we are putting the funding into our NHS that he and his party opposed.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Yesterday, in an attempt to boost morale in the Tea Room, the Prime Minister said to one table, “There were seven MPs in the Carlton Club last week, and one of them should have tried to intervene to stop Chris drinking so much.” As if that was not insulting enough to the people who did try to intervene that night, it is insulting to the victims to say that drink was the problem. Is this not another example of the Prime Minister constantly trying to deflect from the issue? He always tries to blame other people for mistakes. There is nothing left for him to do other than to take responsibility and resign. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that Members ought to be embarrassed by clapping? [*Interruption.*] Order. Mr Esterson, this is not a debating society. This is Prime Minister’s questions. I want to get through the questions because other people want to catch my eye, and the way to do it is not by clapping.

The Prime Minister: There is a very simple reason why they want me out, and that is because they know that otherwise we will get on with delivering our mandate and win another general election. That is the reality.

9. [900927] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister once wrote:

“It is a wonderful and necessary fact of political biology that we never know when our time is up. Long after it is obvious to everyone that we are goners, we continue to believe in our ‘duty’ to hang on...to the perks and privileges of our posts...In reality, we are just terrified of the come-down.”

For the sake of this great country, will the Prime Minister heed the advice of his former self, get over his terror and do the decent thing?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I have just given. When things are tough, of course people turn their fire on the leader of the country. It is my job to get on and deliver our manifesto, which we are; deliver on the mandate on which I was elected; and get this country through tough times, just as we got it through covid. That is what I am going to do.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Around 1,000 delegates from 100 countries are at the freedom of religion or belief international ministerial conference over at the QEII centre today, and there is still time for hon. Members to visit. Does the Prime Minister agree that this significant conference will count for nothing unless it results in concerted global action to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief around the world?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. Freedom of religion or belief is integral to people’s identity, their sense of themselves and their personal security. I thank her for her work as my envoy on this subject, and for the wonderful conference she has organised. It was great to talk to her about it yesterday.

11. [900929] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in expressing my deepest condolences to those injured and affected by the explosion in a block of flats on Redwood Grove in Bedford on Monday that has sadly led to the death of one resident, with others yet to be accounted for? This is a timely reminder of the dangerous work undertaken by the fire service. Will he join me in praising the emergency service workers who were at the scene, and will he reconsider his 2% pay offer when firefighters have endured a 12% real-terms pay cut over the last decade?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much, and I share very much his support for the firefighters of our country. They do an incredible job, and overall it is a testament to their work that deaths from fire over a long period have, on average, been decreasing, thanks to the work that they put in. We will look at the public sector pay review body offer and do our best to fund as much as we can, but everybody knows the inflationary pressures that this country is now under. We do not want to have pay increases that are simply swallowed by price increases.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): North Moreton, in my constituency, was dubbed “Britain’s kindest village”—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ahh!”] Wait for it. This 160-home village was dubbed “Britain’s kindest village” because it committed to taking 50 Ukrainian refugees, and it has them all there now. In the Gallery today there is a group of those hosts and some of the Ukrainians they are hosting, including two young people who hope to go

into Ukrainian politics in the future. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming them to this place and in thanking North Moreton for its efforts?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for what he is doing to host young Ukrainians. I thank everybody in this House who is looking after Ukrainians—a lot of people are doing that. I believe it is the wish of this entire House that those young people should grow up to live in a free, independent, democratic and sovereign Ukraine.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Given that the Prime Minister does not like walk-outs and strikes, what legislation will he be introducing to stop further walk-outs and strikes among his Cabinet colleagues and junior Ministers?

The Prime Minister: I think that the whole House will have observed the brilliant performance on the radio this morning by the new Chancellor of the Exchequer—that is no disrespect to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. It shows that, in common with many sectors of the UK economy, there is a ready supply of skilled labour in the upper reaches of the Conservative party.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I would like to draw the Prime Minister’s attention to the words he used in response to the earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). Six months ago, I called on the Prime Minister to resign because even then it was clear that his approach to leadership and integrity was already creating a pipeline of problems that would paralyse proper government. Today, I ask him to do the honourable thing: to put the interests of the nation before his own interests, before, in his own words, it does become “impossible” for government to do its job.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for the point he has made again, but I just could not disagree with him more. Look at what the Government are doing today. We are cutting taxes for 30 million people, we have just completed a programme to get half a million people off welfare and into work, and, thanks to the strength of our economy, thanks to the position we are now in—because of decisions that we took and the Opposition opposed; we should never forget that—we are able to give £1,200 to 8 million of the poorest and most vulnerable families in this country. That is the right thing to do, we are getting on with it and we will continue with our active and energetic programme for the benefit of this country, uniting, levelling up and unleashing the prosperity of the entire nation.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Clive Betts.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Local Government Association has told us that more than 400 families who have come to this country from Ukraine under the family scheme have subsequently presented themselves as homeless to local authorities. Because the local authorities have not got enough accommodation, those people are going to end up in temporary accommodation. There is a simple answer: local authorities could be allowed to contact the many thousands of people who volunteered to provide homes under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The problem is that the Government do not allow families to transfer from the family scheme to the Homes for Ukraine scheme. When will the Prime

Minister act to ensure that people who have come thousands of miles to this country are not placed in temporary accommodation and that we take up the generosity of those families who are willing to offer them a home?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for the very valuable point he has raised, and we will make sure that families are able to cross over from

one scheme to another, to simplify and speed up the process. But I do not think that that should take away from the generosity of this country in welcoming Ukrainians; 135,000 visas have so far been issued through our uncapped scheme—both the family scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. That is changing the lives of those Ukrainians, and we should all be proud of what we are doing.

Personal Statement

12.39 pm

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I am grateful for your permission to make this personal statement, Mr Speaker. Yesterday we began our day together—you, I, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and Members from across this House—when we broke bread together at the parliamentary prayer breakfast, and we all listened to the words of Rev. Les Isaac, who spoke about the responsibility that comes with leadership: the responsibility to serve the interests of others above our own, and to seek common ground in our party, our community and, above all, our country.

Colleagues will be forgiven for having a sense of *déjà vu*. Despite how it might seem, I am not one of life's quitters. I did not quit when I was told that boys like me do not do maths; I did not quit when old-school bankers said I did not have the right school ties; and I did not quit when people in my community said that I should not marry the love of my life.

I care deeply about public service and giving back to this country that has given me so much. That is why, when I got the call from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister just over a year ago, I did not hesitate to serve again. It was a critical time for our country: tough decisions needed to be made about when we were going to come out of lockdown, and about supporting the national health service and care sector under unprecedented strain.

It has been an absolute privilege of my life to have been entrusted with these responsibilities, and I can only hope that my best has been good enough. It has undoubtedly also been one of the toughest roles I have had so far—the gravity of Home Office decisions; the scale of Treasury decisions—but nothing matters more than the health of our people, the British people, especially in the wake of a pandemic.

Caring for people's health and wellbeing is truly a noble vocation, so I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those across the country working in the health and care sectors, as well as those I worked so closely with in my old Department, the Department of Health and Social Care, and in the NHS. There was so much that I planned for the long-term reform of our health and care systems, and it is a wrench to leave that important work behind.

When I last gave a personal statement from this seat, I spoke about the importance of institutions and conventions. Today, it is about the importance of integrity—and do not worry, there is not going to be a series of these. Institutions and integrity are both central pillars that underpin our great democracy. It does not matter what your political perspective is in this House; I believe that we are all motivated by the national interest and that the public expect all of us to maintain honesty and to maintain integrity in whatever we do. This is not an abstract matter; we have seen what happens in great democracies when divisions are entrenched, and not bridged. We cannot allow that to happen here; we must bring the country together as one nation.

Effective governance inevitably requires loyalty and collective responsibility—of course it does—and I am instinctively a team player and have completely focused on governing effectively over the last year. But treading

the tightrope between loyalty and integrity has become impossible in recent months, and I will never risk losing my integrity.

I also believe that a team is as good as its team captain, and that a captain is as good as his or her team, so loyalty must go both ways. The events of recent months have made it increasingly difficult to be in that team. It is not fair on ministerial colleagues to have to go out every morning defending lines that do not stand up and do not hold up; it is not fair on my parliamentary colleagues, who bear the brunt of constituents' dismay in their inboxes and on the doorsteps in recent elections; and it is not fair on Conservative members and voters who rightly expect better standards from the party they supported.

When the first stories of parties in Downing Street emerged late last year, I was personally assured at the most senior level, by my right hon. Friend's then team, that

"there had been no parties in Downing Street and no rules were broken."

I gave the benefit of the doubt and I went on those media rounds to say that I had had those assurances from the most senior level of the Prime Minister's team. Then we had more stories. We had the Sue Gray report and a new Downing Street team. I continued to give the benefit of the doubt. This week, again, we have reason to question the truth and integrity of what we have all been told. At some point, we have to conclude that enough is enough. I believe that that point is now.

I welcomed the Prime Minister's public acknowledgement last night that matters could have been handled better in who he appointed, what was said about what he knew and when. I appreciated his kind and humble words, and his humble spirit, when I went to see him yesterday, and also the kind letter that he has sent to me. But I do fear that the reset button can work only so many times. There are only so many times that we can turn that machine on and off before we realise that something is fundamentally wrong.

Last month, I gave the benefit of the doubt one last time, but I have concluded that the problem starts at the top, and I believe that that is not going to change. That means it is for those of us in a position of responsibility to make that change. I wish my Cabinet colleagues well. I can see that they have decided to remain in the Cabinet. They will have their own reasons, but it is a choice. I know just how difficult that choice is, but let us be clear: not doing something is an active decision.

I am deeply concerned about how the next generation will see the Conservative party on our current course. Our reputation after 12 years in government depends on regaining the public's trust. This is not just a personal matter: the philosophy and perception of Conservatives depend on it. It is central to the Conservative ideal that we believe in decency, in personal responsibility and in social justice, enabled by conventions and the rule of law. The Conservative mission to extend freedom and prosperity and opportunity is all at risk if we cannot uphold that ideal.

The Conservative party is not the only great institution in need of urgent repair. Like everyone in this House, I have been dismayed by the drip, drip of stories of harassment and worse by Members of this House. I am also concerned about how the next generation will see

this House and the health of our democracy. In recent years, trust in our roles has been undermined by a series of scandals, but the one thing that we can control is our own values and behaviours. It is incumbent on all of us to set high standards for ourselves and to take action when they are not met by others.

I am grateful for the messages of support that I have had from many Members of this House and beyond. I got into politics to do something, not to be somebody, so it is hard in one way, but not in another—being a good father, a husband, a son and a citizen is good enough for me. If I can continue to contribute to public life and to my party from the Back Benches, it will be a privilege to do so.

Mr Speaker: There will be no more personal statements today. *[Interruption.]* I shall let Members leave the House in peace and quiet.

NATO Accession: Sweden and Finland

12.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our support for Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. I am making this statement on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is attending a meeting of the G20 in Indonesia.

Finland and Sweden submitted their formal applications to join NATO on 18 May this year. Less than 50 days later, accession talks have been completed, and yesterday allies signed the accession protocols for both countries. The UK played a significant role in securing agreement from all NATO allies to this important move, with my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary holding numerous discussions with their counterparts. The accession protocols have now been passed to all NATO countries for ratification, and they are being laid in Parliament today under Command Papers CP730 and CP731.

Finland and Sweden are NATO's closest partners. They share our principles and values, including liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They share the alliance's unwavering commitment to international security. They both have years of experience in training and operating with allies and have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions. We work together in the UK-led joint expeditionary force. We value their role in the region and applaud their support for Ukraine.

Their decision to seek NATO membership follows extensive democratic consultations in those countries. It is a mark of the threat that Russia poses to these two countries, who have tried so diligently to remain neutral for so many decades, that they are now applying to join the alliance. We must ensure that they are integrated into NATO as swiftly as possible.

We should aim to complete the ratification process before the summer recess. As things stand, we do not have the 21 sitting days of parliamentary time needed to use section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 to ratify. Therefore, in accordance with section 22 of the Act, we believe that the accession protocols for Sweden and Finland should be ratified without the 21-day requirement having been met. This will allow us to demonstrate the importance we attach to our relationship with these two close partners and our wholehearted support for their decision to join NATO.

In May we provided Sweden and Finland with bilateral security guarantees. It is vital that we now bring them under NATO's article 5 umbrella as swiftly as possible. Their decision to join puts both countries at risk of a potentially aggressive Russian response. Russia has already made numerous threats about the possibility of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO. Using the process I have set out will enable us to ensure that UK ratification is concluded swiftly and to set a positive example for other NATO members to follow. All 30 allies need to ratify the protocols before Finland and Sweden can join the alliance. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been pushing allied colleagues to complete ratification as soon as possible.

[Vicky Ford]

We believe that there is broad cross-party support for Sweden and Finland joining NATO. The Government are committed to both the principle and practice of parliamentary scrutiny of the UK treaties. However, due to the unprecedented circumstances in which Finland and Sweden have made their decision to apply for NATO membership, it is important that we do all we can to expedite their accession.

A strong NATO is at the heart of our ability to deter and defend against adversaries. We showed the strength of the alliance once again at the NATO summit in Madrid last week. NATO is not involved directly in the Ukraine conflict, but we know that Ukraine's ultimate victory is vital for our security. Russia's illegal and barbaric war cannot succeed. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced last week that the UK is providing a further £1 billion of military support for Ukraine, and other allies are stepping up their support as well.

At the summit, leaders also agreed a new NATO strategic concept, which responds to the new security environment. It rightly identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to our security, and it signals a decisive change in our approach to defending the eastern flank, through scaling up capabilities and force readiness to achieve deterrence by denial. For the first time the strategic concept also addresses China and the systemic challenges to our collective security that it poses. It is right that NATO takes an increasingly global perspective of the threats and challenges we face. The alliance should act as a bulwark to the authoritarianism and aggression that we see rising across the world.

Given this more dangerous and competitive landscape, we are calling on all allies to meet, and to be prepared to exceed, the target we set ourselves a decade ago of spending 2% of GDP on defence. That goal was set for a very different era, and we need to be ready to go further. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that the UK is likely to be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade.

We are determined to strengthen NATO as the No. 1 guarantor of Euro-Atlantic security and, through the alliance, to stand up for freedom, sovereignty and self-determination around the world. The accession of Finland and Sweden will further strengthen NATO and bolster our security. By ratifying the accession protocols without delay we will send a message of unity against Russian aggression and a message of support to Finland and Sweden. We look forward to welcoming these two long-standing friends to NATO. We will continue to stand side by side with all allies in defence of our shared values and our collective security. Therefore, I commend this statement to the House.

12.56 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO is an historic decision that is wholeheartedly welcomed by the Labour party. Finland and Sweden will be valuable members of this alliance of democracies that share the values of freedom and the rule of law and that seek peace through collective security.

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is a turning point for Europe. As we strengthen UK and European security, it is more important than ever to do so alongside our allies. The great post-war Labour Government was instrumental in the creation of NATO and the signing of the North Atlantic treaty in 1949. Seven decades later, the alliance remains the cornerstone of our defence, and Labour's commitment to NATO is unshakeable.

I have visited both Finland and Sweden in recent months to discuss the consequences of Russia's attack on Ukraine. I have seen the careful, considered and democratic approach that the Governments of both countries have taken to this new security context. They saw the need to think anew and to reassess the assumptions of the past. I pay tribute to the Swedish and Finnish Foreign Ministers, Ann Linde and Pekka Haavisto, for their roles in stewarding this process. It is a remarkable illustration of the dangers that Putin poses that Sweden and Finland have reversed their long-held policies of non-alignment. But is it also a demonstration of the way that Russia's attack on Ukraine has had the opposite effect from what was intended—strengthening rather than weakening NATO, unifying rather than dividing the alliance. As the recent Madrid summit demonstrated, NATO is responding resolutely to the threat Russia poses and adapting to the challenges of the future.

I do note, though, that although Finland and Sweden and many other NATO allies, including Germany, have reassessed their defence planning in this new context, the UK has not. Labour, in government, did exactly that after the 9/11 attacks, introducing the longest sustained real-terms increase in spending for two decades. We believe that the Government should reboot defence plans and halt cuts to the Army, as we have been arguing for months. We also believe that it is important to deepen our security co-operation with our European allies and the EU, as a complement to NATO's role as the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security.

Turning to the mechanism of ratification, in normal circumstances we would rightly expect the House to have appropriate time to consider and consent to the ratification of an international treaty of this importance. But these are not normal circumstances, and there are clear risks to both countries from a drawn-out accession process, so we recognise the need for the Government to act with haste in these exceptional circumstances.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for keeping me up to date on that particular matter, and for the Government's decision to come to update the House today. It provides an opportunity for the whole House to send a united message of support to our new allies and I hope it will encourage other NATO partners to move swiftly in the ratification process too. Putin has sought division, but has only strengthened Europeans' unity and NATO's resolve. We stand together in defence of democracy and the rule of law.

Vicky Ford: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his words. We stand together united across this House in providing support to Ukraine and in standing against Russia's illegal aggression. We are also united today in providing support to our allies in Finland and Sweden and using this exceptional process—I believe it is the first time it has ever been used—to fast-track this House's approval of their accession. By doing so, we send a strong message that this House will always stand for

freedom and democracy and against aggression. I remind him that we are on track to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of this decade.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for announcing this to the House. It has been an important negotiation and conversation over recent weeks and months. My own meetings with the Prime Minister of Finland and the Foreign Minister of Sweden have been important in assuring me that their commitment is real and that this agreement is fundamental not just to their security, but to ours.

Let us not forget what this is about. NATO is not an overseas adventure; it is fundamentally about the defence of the homes we are lucky to live in and the neighbours and friends we are lucky to live beside. It is about defending the whole of the United Kingdom, all of our coast and, especially in the case of Finland and Sweden, the high north and the Scottish coasts and islands that are so important to the integrity of the United Kingdom. It is fundamentally about defence of the realm.

I pay enormous tribute to my hon. Friend and the whole Foreign Office team who have got this negotiation over the line. Will she now, however, engage in conversations with our Swedish and Finnish partners to ensure that our interoperability goes much deeper, not just into equipment purchase, so that we can end the war in Ukraine quickly and before the winter starts putting extra costs on families across our country?

Vicky Ford: Madam Deputy Speaker, could I ask you a favour? One of the Finnish Ministers is actually in this place and is trying to get access to one of the Galleries, but because we have been rather full they have not been able to get through the House authorities. I am sure all my colleagues would like to welcome the Minister to come and listen. Could you possibly ask for that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I understand that that has been sorted.

Vicky Ford: Oh, she is there. I therefore welcome Minister Johanna Sumuvuori, who is here for the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief. I say to her: we welcome you very much to hear this historic moment as well. Thank you for being with us, and we stand with Finland and Sweden.

In response to the specific questions the Chair of the Select Committee asked, Sweden and Finland have been working with NATO for many years, as I outlined. That is one reason why they have been able to accede to NATO within such a short period of time. They have already met the criteria for NATO membership, and I am sure we will look to work with them as closely as possible during the period between now and the vote, and even more closely once they become full members.

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

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I too thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. It is a pleasure to see her in her place, although I should point out there are still nine and a half resigning hours until “Newsnight”.

More seriously, it is important to stress where we agree, and the SNP agrees with the UK Government’s position in welcoming the applications, from a position of self-determination and democratic sovereignty, of Finland and Sweden to join NATO. I also welcome our Finnish colleague to the Gallery and pledge the SNP’s support for a speedy accession process into NATO. Finland and Sweden will be very welcome; they will augment the alliance, and we support that.

We also support the expedited approval process within this House that the Minister proposes under section 22 of the 2010 Act. I stress that that is not a precedent or a blank cheque, but, as the Minister says, the circumstances match that case and very much merit the suspension of normal procedures. We also support NATO’s strategic concept from an SNP perspective and believe NATO is the cornerstone of European defence. We look forward, under our worldview, to seeing an independent Scotland joining the 29 out of 32 non-nuclear NATO member states—that is, of course, a different discussion.

We on the SNP Benches are NATO supporters. While we support the strategic concept, since the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee made wider points it is also worth mentioning the EU’s strategic compass, which is moving at light speed. The EU is developing a much stronger unified defence capability. The UK risks missing out on those negotiations and the UK defence industry and defence operations risk missing those co-ordinations. I reiterate our call for a deep and comprehensive UK-EU strategic defence treaty, as well as augmenting the NATO alliance. We support what the Minister presents today, and I thank her for the statement.

Vicky Ford: While I support the hon. Gentleman’s sharing our joint approach to accession by Sweden and Finland and his approval of the fast-track process we are laying in exceptional circumstances, I do not treat our national security as a joking matter, and it is not the time to be cracking jokes when we are talking about our national security. I am very pleased that the Scottish nationalists have just said that they support NATO, although how they can say that they support our national security when they do not support our nuclear deterrent is deeply questionable.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Of course this is a hugely welcome announcement and one of the more significant moments in the history of the NATO alliance, not least because Sweden and Finland bring a huge military contribution to the alliance, so this cannot in any way be seen as a one-way street. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as important as it is to talk about hardware—Finland and Sweden are able to supply several icebreakers, with climate change and the high north’s opening up—cyber-defence is one of the biggest issues? It is very difficult to identify where cyber-attacks come from. It would probably be quite easy to make one appear to come from this place, and who would we retaliate against? Does she agree that the offer that Finland and Sweden can make to the NATO alliance is vital, but also that the position and power we have in this country to help to stop cyber-attacks and defend those nations is equally important in this long-lasting, world-beating defence alliance?

Vicky Ford: I know my right hon. Friend makes an important contribution in the discussions he often has with NATO colleagues. He rightly points to one of the

[Vicky Ford]

many reasons why it is so important that Finland and Sweden should be enabled to accede to NATO as quickly as possible. That is why the UK is going to push a faster approval process than is normal, and why we encourage our NATO allies to also ratify as quickly as possible.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Of course I completely support Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. Indeed, I remember having conversations with Alexander Stubb back in 2009, trying to persuade him to put this matter more firmly on the agenda for Finland. However, one of my anxieties around NATO is that my Ukrainian friends have been telling me that the lethal equipment that is being provided by different countries around Europe comes in 34 different shapes and sizes, with 34 different manuals. Would it not be much more sensible, if we are really to make sure that Putin does not win, to have an industrial strategy to ensure that the equipment provided to Ukraine is usable by the Ukrainians and does not require 34 different training sessions?

Vicky Ford: I remind the House that the UK has played an absolutely central role in providing military assistance to Ukraine. Indeed, only last week the Prime Minister announced a further £1 billion-worth of military support to Ukraine, and we will be adding additional cutting-edge multiple launch rocket systems. On training, which is important, over the past decade we have trained over 22,000 Ukrainian troops. I take the hon. Gentleman's point about making sure that, where possible, there is a joint approach in the support for Ukraine, but I also point him to what was agreed at the Madrid summit last week, which was a historic agreement by all NATO partners to step up support for Ukraine and to provide it with advice, training and equipment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the register.

I very much welcome this statement. Does the Minister recognise that notwithstanding Sweden and Finland's non-aligned status, since 1997 they, along with Austria, have been active participants in NATO's Partnership for Peace? Will she pay tribute to that programme and say which other members of Partnership for Peace she anticipates making similar overtures in the near future?

Vicky Ford: As I said in my opening remarks, Finland and Sweden have been working very closely with NATO for a considerable period. On other partners, every country has its own path towards NATO membership, and no third party has a say in that process. Ukraine, among other countries, is currently an enhanced opportunity partner, and NATO remains firmly committed to the open-door policy. I cannot be more specific at this point.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My constituents know all about NATO, for two reasons: first, because the regular Exercise Joint Warrior is partly carried out in the north-west of Sutherland; and secondly, because Russian naval units are not terribly far over the horizon from my northernmost-on-the-British-mainland constituency. Therefore, on behalf of my party, I absolutely welcome the accession of Sweden and Finland. My party is internationalist in outlook, so

does the Minister agree that co-operation with not only NATO but other organisations—the World Trade Organisation, the EU or whatever—can only enhance this country's hand and position in the world?

Vicky Ford: I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency well. I have had the opportunity of standing in some of the beautiful parts of it and seeing overhead some of the actions of our own forces, and I understand how close his constituents sometimes feel to our allies just the other side of the North sea, as well as their concerns. I welcome the fact that he and his party stand with us on supporting the succession process. We have been working very closely with many international partners on support for Ukraine and standing up against Russian aggression. Indeed, only yesterday I was in the European Parliament meeting some of my former colleagues from many countries, many of whom praised our Prime Minister for the leadership he has taken globally on the issue of Russia and Ukraine. We must prioritise NATO as an important contributor to our defence and our strategic defence, and that is the topic that we are discussing today—but yes, we talk to other organisations as well.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister recognise with me the work of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe for the lobbying that we have undertaken of the Turkish delegation to get Turkey to change its mind over the admission of Sweden and Finland to NATO?

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for his work leading Parliament's delegation to the Council of Europe, which I heard being praised yesterday when I was in Strasbourg. We welcome the fact that agreement was reached by all members of NATO. The alliance's strength is that it requires consensus. The end result—Finland and Sweden joining the alliance—is something to celebrate, and we encourage all members to ratify as quickly as possible.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The statement is almost low-key given this extraordinary moment in NATO history, especially for Finland and Sweden, whose accession I of course support. We should not underestimate this massive change in policy. The world, not just Europe, faces an extraordinary threat from what Russia is doing, not just in Ukraine but elsewhere. Aligned with that, the Government must take a decision to increase defence spending, capability and personnel numbers in the armed forces—I suggest that the Minister looks at the Defence Secretary's comments in reply to my questions in yesterday's Select Committee meeting—quickly in response to the threat that we now face

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member is absolutely right that, after many decades of Finland and Sweden standing as neutral countries, this is an extraordinary moment. They have joined NATO because it is their future and they have chosen to. Indeed, they have gone through a very significant democratic process in order to make that decision. Fundamentally, they are coming together because the world is united in condemnation of Russia's brutal attack, so we must absolutely stand with them. I refer the hon. Member to what I said about the Government's commitment to increasing spend to 2.5% by the end of the decade. As a member of the Defence

Committee, he will have many an occasion to discuss this more specifically with colleagues from the Ministry of Defence.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I also welcome Sweden's and Finland's membership of NATO, which will boost European security. Does the Minister agree that it sends a clear message to aggressors such as Putin that any invasion of other countries will only strengthen international opposition to them?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is spot on. NATO membership is key in promoting the rule of law. It is the most successful defensive alliance in history, and bringing Finland and Sweden into the NATO family will make it even stronger. That is exactly the opposite of what Russia thought it would achieve, but it is what is being achieved. This is a positive force for good for the world.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement: it is great that Sweden and Finland will be joining NATO. However, will her Government halt their cuts to our Army? We now have the smallest British Army for 300 years. We need to increase the size of our armed forces, not make the cut of 10,000 troops that the Government are still pushing through.

Vicky Ford: I refer again to what I said about being on track to spend 2.5% of GDP by the end of the decade. The hon. Member will have to discuss the details with the Defence Secretary and his team. It is important to remember, however, that we also need to invest for the long term in vital capabilities such as future combat air and AUKUS, as well as adapting to a more dangerous and competitive world. We need to be able to have these forward-looking alternatives as well.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I declare an interest, not only as the chairman of the British-Swedish all-party parliamentary group, but as someone who has been an active proponent of closer British-Swedish relations for some time. We have rightly praised the hard work that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has done to expedite the accession of Sweden and Finland, but I also pay tribute to the Swedish Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, who has done incredible work within Sweden to change, in a few short months, its official posture—held for more than 200 years—of non-military alignment, and to gain support within her party, Parliament and the Swedish population. Does my hon. Friend agree that she deserves a lot of credit for what she has been able to do?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I praise not only the Swedish leadership but that of Finland. I know that he pays close attention to the affairs of Sweden, a country for which he has strong personal affection, and I know that as a former serving member of the Royal Navy, he pays close attention to what happens on our seas and therefore across our North sea.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Minister for her statement. Like many others, I absolutely condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What steps are being taken to engage an interlocutor, through the United Nations or some other world body, to try to bring about a ceasefire so that lives may be saved, both of the people in Ukraine and conscripted Russian soldiers,

and at least a cessation of fighting in the war before some ultimate political settlement? All wars end with a political settlement. The killing is appalling and refugee flows are terrible. Surely we must talk the language of peace, as well as the language she has put forward this morning.

Vicky Ford: Russia started this illegal war. Ever since it started, we have continually—day in, day out—asked Russia to lay down its weapons and stop this illegal, brutal and horrible war. Russia must lay down its weapons, and we will continue to call, with our allies and friends around the world, for that ceasefire that everybody so much wants.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Although not in the circumstances that any of us would have wanted, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO is, as the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) rightly said, a hugely significant event in the development of our own security and that of our friends and neighbours. As we go through the ratification process, speed will be of the essence for the other 29 countries also going through that process. Can my hon. Friend the Minister say any more about how long the overall process will take? In the meantime, will there be parallel planning to ensure that once Finland and Sweden come into NATO, we are up and running around the interoperability and integration of those nations into the alliance, so that they can benefit as much from it as possible, and we from them?

Vicky Ford: NATO remains firmly committed to the open door policy, but bringing another country into NATO requires all 30 members—now more—to agree, because it works by consensus. On increasing NATO capabilities, we are significantly increasing the availability of UK forces to NATO, which will include the majority of our maritime forces, extra air squadrons and increasing the number of land brigade-sized units.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I do not often agree with the Minister, and that will not be a surprise, but my goodness, I agree with her today, wholeheartedly. Our support for the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO is unqualified, and why would it not be, given their adherence to and prioritising of liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as the Minister said? Interestingly, they are also non-nuclear armed, and they will be non-nuclear hosting. They have a proud martial tradition going back many hundreds of years, which is integral to their society, and they have a diverse and extensive military industrial complex employing thousands and generating billions, alongside outstanding capability. That could also 100% describe Scotland, so with independence, what is to stop Scotland joining NATO also?

Vicky Ford: I believe, and this Government believe, that our country's defence is stronger when we are united as one nation. I also believe that core to our defence is our nuclear deterrent.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the statement that the Minister has made. It is vital that Ukraine wins this war, both militarily and domestically, and that the alliance is strengthened, and I am pleased to see Finland and Sweden joining. I am, however, concerned about reports of the Kurds being used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations. We have

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

abandoned the Kurds far too many times in history. Can the Minister offer reassurances that we will continue to support the YPG and the YPJ in north-east Syria, where they have defeated ISIS, that we will not buckle under the demands to treat them as a terrorist organisation—they are its opposite, an anti-terrorist organisation—and that we will continue to push the Turkish Government, as a NATO member, to pursue democratic reforms rather than democratic persecution?

Vicky Ford: We welcome the agreements made at the Madrid summit last week. These brought together all members, by consensus, to agree to Norway and Sweden joining. That involves discussions with every single one of NATO's members.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): We all cannot overstate the significance or momentousness of this announcement. Many of us will have lived through the many decades of the cold war and will appreciate that for Sweden and Finland to be making this decision now underlines the seriousness of the situation. I welcome the announcement from NATO to increase its high-readiness force from 40,000 to 300,000, but I have concerns, as mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Halton (Derek Twigg) and for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), that by reducing our Army's personnel by 10,000, we are reducing it to a smaller capacity than the US Marine Corps. Will she agree with Labour that we must halt those cuts immediately?

Vicky Ford: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for what has been agreed at the Madrid summit. It was a truly historic summit. It not only made huge progress

in bringing Finland and Sweden into joining NATO, but agreed a new strategic concept and a paradigm shift in the security environment, and allies significantly strengthened NATO's deterrence and defence. As I have already pointed out, the UK is making significant contributions to enhance our contribution to NATO.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for the statement. Recent news that the 30 member countries of NATO have signed accession protocols for Sweden and Finland to join have been welcomed, and that news makes the world a safer place today. They also have greater access to intelligence in relation to Russia and the aggression that it espouses. Will the Minister ensure that we continue to have a clear commitment to protect Sweden and Finland in the short term, as well as the long term, against the aggressive intrusion of Putin and the Russian Government?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree with the hon. Member that Finland and Sweden joining NATO makes the world a safer place for the people of the United Kingdom, for all our NATO allies and for all those who are concerned about Russian aggression and what Ukraine means for the potential future of their country. That is why we will continue to stand with like-minded partners across the world to defend democracy and freedom, and that is why the House is united in ensuring that the ratification of the accession passes as swiftly as possible through the fast-track procedure at this truly exceptional time. We stand united with all those parties who agree to it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the observers to whom she referred in the Gallery.

Miscarriage Leave

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

1.30 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for paid leave for people who have experienced miscarriage.

The Bill seeks to give three days' paid leave for parents who have experienced miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy or molar pregnancy before 24 weeks. For any expectant parent, this is a devastating experience that is often further compounded by the stigma and shame of miscarriage. For some families, it may be an experience that happens more than once, compounding the trauma of their loss.

At present, there is no legal right to paid leave for parents grieving the loss of a pregnancy before 24 weeks. Although an increasing number of organisations, including ASOS, Monzo, the Scottish Government and others, have adopted paid miscarriage leave policies, sadly, not all employers are as generous. Most employers that do not have the means will not do so. The majority will not offer such a policy without being prompted by employment legislation. That means that many people are suffering alone in silent grief following pregnancy loss without the support they need.

With this Bill, I propose that, rather than relying on the generosity of employers, the UK should follow the groundbreaking legislation in New Zealand that gives all workers three days' paid leave in the event of miscarriage. I know that I have the support of Members on both sides of the House; organisations including the Miscarriage Association and the Ectopic Pregnancy Trust; and the 41,000 people who signed the petition calling for paid miscarriage leave. I ask Members present to give their support too.

Tragically, one in four pregnancies will end in miscarriage. This is not a minority issue and it is not a niche concern. The Bill could benefit 1 million people a year. Under current UK legislation, workers are entitled to two weeks of paid bereavement leave following a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), reminds me of that each time I speak on this issue, but no parent who loses a baby at 23 weeks and 6 days will be comforted by his reliance on that arbitrary line in the sand. It offers nothing to grieving parents who have lost a baby before that 24-week mark and it fails to recognise their grief and loss. Instead, they must rely on sick leave or unpaid leave if they feel unable to return to work following their pregnancy loss.

It is simply not good enough that those suffering miscarriage and the associated grief of their loss are not recognised. Although I welcome the Government's policy of providing paid bereavement leave for the loss of a child after 24 weeks of pregnancy, this Bill would close the gap in support for those who experience pregnancy loss. I have worked on the issue for well over a year and it never gets easier to speak about, so Members must forgive me if I take a minute.

Suffering miscarriage is not an illness; it is a loss that can be traumatic for expectant parents. Sick leave alone fails to recognise that their grief is no less worthy of

time to grieve. People experiencing a miscarriage feel the physical pain of contractions, combined with the heart-wrenching agony of losing a child—they may have glimpsed the child's face on a scan; they may have known whether it was a boy or a girl; they may have chosen a name; they may have already decorated a nursery. Their hopes and dreams are crushed in that moment.

Many parents feel unable to discuss their loss with friends and family, never mind their employer. It is an injustice to expect grieving parents to appeal to their employer's good will. Introducing paid leave would open the door to parents getting the support that they deserve, without the need for an often impossible conversation with their employer.

Last week, I met Keeley Lengthorn, a brave campaigning lawyer determined to see policy change in the legal profession and to protect those who experience miscarriage. She wrote in *The Law Society Gazette* this week about her personal experiences of miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy, and the impact that they have had on her working life. In March this year, her son George was born sleeping at 22 and a half weeks. While nothing can make this loss easier for Keeley, the very last thing on her mind at that point was work. Fortunately, thanks to her tireless campaigning, her workplace had introduced a miscarriage leave policy that, tragically, she was first to use.

An increasing number of private and public sector organisations now follow the New Zealand model, which allows three days' paid bereavement leave to mothers and their partners in the event of miscarriage. Such a policy means that people know that they have the backing of their employer, that they can approach their employer to have that difficult conversation with a degree of certainty about the support that they will receive, and that they will have the time to deal with the trauma of losing a baby.

Keeley's article makes it clear how important miscarriage leave is in dealing with such a devastating circumstance of physical and emotional loss. It is an example of good practice where her employer recognised the need for miscarriage leave, but it does not follow that all employers will offer the same support in those circumstances. The decision whether to provide that leave is currently in the hands of employers. Sadly, when we cross our fingers and hope that companies will do the right thing, without a statutory requirement, we are often disappointed. Bringing miscarriage leave into legislation would mean that all workers who experience miscarriage have a legal right to paid leave. They would be given much-needed support and compassion when they need it most, and the permission to take that time to grieve.

The Government did not bring forward legislation to update employment law in this year's Queen's Speech. We risk falling behind international best practice if we continue to ignore the needs of workers who experience pregnancy loss. The Taylor review, which should have led the Government to introduce an employment Bill, makes it clear that physical and mental health are interlinked with work performance. Miscarriage undoubtedly affects employees' health. Modernising employment law must include provision for miscarriage leave. This policy will aid workplace productivity by requiring employers to follow international best practice.

[Angela Crawley]

More than that, it will help individuals and families to cope with one of the most difficult experiences that they will go through in their life.

I hope that Members across the House will join me in calling for paid miscarriage leave to be made a reality in the UK. This issue is not tied to independence or reserved for one side of the House. This Bill has cross-party support and the colour of a rosette should not affect its chance of success. I am asking for a fairly small provision—less than I would like and less than most parents should expect—but it is a start. Any Member of this House is likely to have around 400 constituents who will experience a miscarriage this year alone. They may be crossing their fingers and hoping that this House finally does the right thing, so let us not disappoint them.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Angela Crawley, Alyn Smith, Dave Doogan, Anum Qaisar, Kirsty Blackman, Carol Monaghan and Anne McLaughlin present the Bill.

Angela Crawley accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 136).

Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Department for Education

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £18,800,792,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022-23,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £21,623,660,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £54,021,048,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Michelle Donelan.*)

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

1.40 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate in response to the Department for Education's publication of its main estimates for 2022-23. Before I go on with my speech, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (*Michelle Donelan*), the now Secretary of State for Education? She was on my Select Committee and was a very hard-working member. She has been a superb Minister for Universities, and I know she will carry on in that tradition in her new role as Secretary of State.

Today, I want to highlight three areas where the system can and must prioritise spending to achieve the Department's goal of levelling-up education—severe and persistent absence, tackling disadvantage, and skills. Severe and persistent absence is not a new problem. Members across this House will know that I have been going on about that since last summer. At the Education Committee, we have been hearing concerns regarding the “ghost children”—a term that I coined last year—throughout the pandemic.

Let me set the scene. In July last year, the Centre for Social Justice reported that over 90,000 pupils were severely absent. Just a few weeks ago, the Children's Commissioner published a report that went further, stating that an estimated 124,000 children were now severely absent, with 1.7 million persistently absent. The Department for Education's own figures from autumn last year showed that 1.6 million children were persistently absent, which is 23.5% of all pupils. More recently, the Department for Education's publications have highlighted that currently over 1,000 schools have an entire class-worth of children missing.

The Children's Commissioner has laid out a mandate that headteachers across the country should be obsessing over attendance and she is right. How can we expect children to catch up if they are not even showing up? But in tackling attendance, we need carrots as well as sticks. The Government have introduced a consultation on their proposed reforms when it comes to attendance, including financial penalties, prosecutions and better data access.

Dame Rachel de Souza has said that

“we do not have an accurate real time figure of how many children there are in England...let alone the number of children not receiving education.”

That is from the Children's Commissioner. That cannot be right. That is why, almost a year ago now, my Committee called for a statutory register of children not in school. The Government have committed to implement that, but this is a matter of urgency and ideally should be implemented by September.

The recently published book, "The Children's Inquiry", from the parents campaigning group UsforThem, highlights that, although the Children's Commissioner mandate has been beefed up, the powers granted to the office do not include enforcement powers such as those granted to the Information Commissioner or the Financial Conduct Authority. The stick approach must include extending these powers to the Office of the Children's Commissioner to help to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, is returned safely to school at the start of term in September, otherwise we will risk a generation of "Oliver Twist" children being lost to the education system forever.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his exceptional commitment to education as Chair of the Committee, and I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role in this House and wish her well.

One of the things the right hon. Gentleman and I share, and I think others in this Chamber share as well, is a concern about underachievement. In Northern Ireland, the statistics have very clearly shown the underachievement of young Protestant males, but on the mainland it is of white males. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that, within the estimates for education today in this Chamber, there are the moneys needed to turn that issue around—in other words, to make them achievers rather than underachievers—and that it can actually happen?

Robert Halfon: I could not hear the first part of what the hon. Gentleman said. Was he talking about free school meals? I could not hear; I apologise.

Jim Shannon: It is my accent—apologies. In Northern Ireland, it is young Protestant males who underachieve in education. Here on the mainland—the right hon. Gentleman and I have both spoken about it in this Chamber before—it is about the underachievement of white males. I know he shares my concern, but I would just like to know whether it is possible, within the estimates, that moneys will be set aside to ensure that those who underachieve actually will achieve their goals in this life?

Robert Halfon: I very much hope so. The hon. Gentleman will look at this forensically and he will know, because we have done an extensive report on the underachievement of white working-class boys and girls, that they underperform at every stage of the education system and worse than almost every other ethnic group. Those white working-class boys and girls on free school meals do worse than every other ethnic group, bar Roma and Gypsy children, on going to university. This is where funds need to be directed. The money should be concentrated on such cohorts. It is not just white working-class boys and girls; just 7% of children in care get a decent grade in maths and English GCSE and 5% of excluded children get a decent grade in maths and English GCSE. This is where the resources, in my view, should be concentrated. We need to address these social injustices in education.

Secondly, I turn to the social injustice of disadvantage. In May, the Government announced a new Schools Bill, following the publication of the schools White Paper. Media attention and discussion has centred around the appropriate levels of departmental intervention, and I know that the Department has gutted a significant part of that Bill, but I question whether this is simply dancing on the head of a pin. Of course, academies should have autonomy—I do not dispute that—but my question, and this refers to my answer to the hon. Gentleman a moment ago, is whether the Bill misses vital opportunities to address baked-in disadvantage among the most disadvantaged pupils in our communities.

Disadvantaged groups are 18 months behind their better-off peers by the time they take their GCSEs. White working-class boys and girls on free school meals underperform at every stage of the education system compared with almost every other group. Moreover, only 17% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieve a grade 5 in their maths and English GCSE. This figure expands to just 18% of children with special educational needs, just 7% of children in care and 5% of excluded children.

Exam results are of course important, and every August they understandably hit the headlines, but I am just as worried about the impact of covid-19 on younger children. We cannot afford for our most disadvantaged children to miss that first rung on the ladder of opportunity. The building blocks for achievement must be in place well before critical exam years and, indeed, before school. I am pleased to see that resource expenditure for early years has increased by 10.6% in these estimates, although capital funding has slightly decreased.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the focus on disadvantage by the Chair of the Education Committee in this part of his speech. Another aspect of disadvantage is experienced by Grange Primary School in my constituency, which sees huge mobility in the young people it educates as the cost of living crisis and, crucially, the cost of renting property in my constituency—and, I suspect, across London more generally—has rocketed, leading, unfortunately, to many families moving regularly. That creates huge pressures on school staff and school budgets. Will he encourage the Department for Education to look at whether there needs to be more focus on mobility as part of the funding formula, to help what I think is a good school with great staff trying to do a particularly tough job because of that mobility issue?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Member makes a powerful point. We want to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities to go to "good" and "outstanding" schools. The cost of living pressures that he mentions are powerful, and I am sure that the new Secretary of State is listening.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Further to my hon. Friend's intervention, the other side of the coin for local authorities is finding temporary accommodation anywhere for families with children. I am sure that many families from London end up being placed in temporary accommodation in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. In my constituency, we are seeing more families farmed out to Kent or Essex, so staying on at a primary school is extraordinarily difficult,

[Siobhain McDonagh]

with over 124,000 children in temporary accommodation. Does he think that those issues should be taken in the round because of their impact on education?

Robert Halfon: As I said, I am sure that the Secretary of State is listening. Everywhere we look, there are all kinds of pressures on our education system. It is not just the things that the hon. Members mentioned; schools are paying huge amounts in energy bills, for example, and are not able to afford that. Instead of spending money on frontline teaching, they are having to pay energy bills. Those are big issues that the Government will have to deal with. I very much hope that, given that the previous Secretary of State had such a passion for education and that he is now the Chancellor, the education budget will see a significant increase in the autumn. That could resolve some of the things the hon. Lady talked about.

The Education Committee's inquiry on the Government's catch-up programme heard that, by summer 2021, primary pupils had lost about 0.9 months in reading and 2.2 months in mathematics. David Laws from the Education Policy Institute told our Committee of his concerns that vulnerable groups could be up to eight months behind in their learning.

The Government have invested almost £5 billion in catch-up and, following the recommendations in the Committee's catch-up report, they have ended the contract with national tutoring programme provider Randstad and given schools more autonomy to organise catch-up programmes, at least from later in the year. They should reform the clunky pupil premium so that it much better targets those most in need of support. Data is available about education related to ethnicity, geography and socioeconomic background, but it is rarely cross-referenced to provide a richer analysis. By creating multivariant datasets, the DFE could facilitate a sophisticated view of which areas, schools and pupils need the most help. It could then reform the pupil premium using those datasets to introduce weighting or ringfencing to ensure that funding is spent on the most disadvantaged cohorts.

A further key measure that I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to consider is provision of school breakfasts. The Government have rightly spent more than £200 million on the holiday activities programme, which is also funded and supported by Essex council in my constituency—I have seen that programme work, benefiting many children, and I support it—but more must be done on breakfasts. According to the Magic Breakfast charity, 73% of teachers think that breakfast provision has had a positive impact. Attendance increased in schools offering breakfast provision, with 26 fewer half-days of absence per year. I saw that for myself with Magic Breakfast on a visit to Cooks Spinney school in my constituency last Friday, where attendance has rocketed because the school ensures that the most disadvantaged children have a good breakfast when they start their school day.

The study also found that children in schools supported by breakfast provision made two months' additional progress over the course of an academic year. An evaluation of the national school breakfast programme by EEF found a 28% reduction in late marks in a term and a 24% reduction in behavioural incidents. School breakfast

provision should be a key intervention that the Secretary of State should look at more closely. Currently, the breakfast provision service reaches just 30% of schools in areas with high levels of disadvantage and invests just £12 million a year. By comparison, last year, taxpayers spent £380 million on free school meal vouchers.

Magic Breakfast proposes to invest £75 million more per year in school breakfasts, raised from the soft drinks industry levy—it is not even asking for more money—which would both provide value for money and increase educational attainment. It could reach an estimated 900,000 pupils with a nutritious breakfast throughout the year. That could complement other ideas, such as the deeper strategy for supporting family hubs, and go a long way to providing those children with the first step on the first rung of the ladder of opportunity.

Finally, I turn to skills, which I know the new Secretary of State is passionate about. As my Committee has heard in both our current inquiry into post-16 qualifications and our previous work on adult skills, the UK faces a worrying skills deficit. About 9 million working-age adults in England have low literacy or numeracy skills—or both—and 6 million are not qualified to level 2, which is the equivalent of a GCSE grade 4 or above. Although participation in adult learning seems to have grown since it was at a record low in 2019—44% of adults have taken part in some learning over the past three years—stark inequalities remain. Those in lower socioeconomic groups are twice as likely not to have participated in learning since leaving full-time education than those in higher socioeconomic groups. Our current inquiry into adult skills has heard that employer-led training has declined by a half since the end of the 1990s.

The Government have taken some welcome steps including the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, the £2.5 billion national skills fund, the £2 billion kickstart scheme, £3 billion of additional investment in skills and the lifetime skills guarantee. It is reassuring to see increased resource and capital funding for further education in the estimates, together with growth in the adult skills budget—although, in terms of further education, much of that is catch-up. We need to go further. Levelling the skills playing field is about how we teach as well as the financial resources that we put in.

During my Committee's inquiry into the future of post-16 qualifications, we have heard about the need for a curriculum that not just imparts facts but embeds cross-cutting skills that will better prepare all young people for our fast-moving industrial future. On a recent visit to King Ethelbert School in Kent, I heard great things about the career-related programme of the international baccalaureate, but there are concerns about future approval for its funding. That seems to be at odds with the Government's skills agenda. *The Times* education commission, in which I took part as a voluntary member, recently recommended a British baccalaureate-style qualification.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend knows my views on the baccalaureate-style system. Used by 150 other countries around the world, it combines academic and vocational learning, creating true parity of esteem between the two disciplines and adequately preparing young people for the future world of work. The Department has recently undertaken a consultation and review of the qualifications horizon, particularly to reform the

BTEC system. The FFT Education Datalab found that young people who took BTECs were more likely to be in employment at the age 22 of and were earning about £800 more per year than their peers taking A-levels. I understand the need to review the system and prevent overlaps, but, just to be clear, I urge my colleagues on the Front Bench not to remove BTEC funding until T-levels have been fully rolled out and are successful.

I strongly welcome the grip that the previous Education Secretary had on the Department, and I welcome the fact that he had some success in the spending review in securing an additional £14 billion over the next years. However, we are still playing catch-up when it comes to education recovery and further education. The brutal fact is that the total budget for health spending will have increased from 2010 to 2025 by 40%, whereas education spending will have increased by only 3% in real terms for the same period. Ultimately, as for health and defence, what we need for education is a long-term plan and a secure funding settlement.

Every lever and every engine of Government should be geared towards returning absent pupils to school. I ask the Secretary of State to set out in her response the practical steps the Department is taking to address the issues faced by disadvantaged pupils who are not able to climb the ladder of opportunity. We are denying those children the right to an education. In my view, it must be the most important priority for the Department to get them back into school. It is unforgivable that there are 1.7 million persistently absent children and that 100,000 ghost children have been lost to school rolls. That number is growing. Previously, roughly 800 schools in disadvantaged areas had the equivalent of a whole classroom missing, but figures from the Department for Education show that now 1,000 schools do. That situation is wrong. It must be taken seriously, and efforts should be made to tackle it. As the Children's Commissioner said to the Education Committee yesterday, by September every one of those children should be back in school.

The previous Education Secretary said he could not “hug the world” but I know his priorities truly were “skills, schools and families”. I am sure they are the priorities of the new Secretary of State. Our children, the workers of the future, will need technical skills but also the ability to think creatively, work across subject silos and, most of all, adapt. As our country and economy move towards the fourth industrial revolution, we must ensure our education system can adapt to meet those challenges.

2.2 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the contribution from the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). His words were brave, but one suspects a degree of worry in some of the things he said about the direction of policy, especially on the funding of the Department. I welcome the new regime under the new Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). We shall see which direction she takes the Department in.

We are discussing why we spend billions of pounds on education, and it is worth beginning my contribution on that thought. Our society puts so much money into education to try to achieve several different objectives,

but I just want to focus on one. Education ought to help each person to achieve their full potential in life, and that raises the question of what our society offers to people. The British promise is that each generation can expect the next generation to do slightly better than them, and the one after that to do slightly better; and that if people work hard and play by the rules, they can expect to do well in our society.

We sometimes call that social mobility. I note that we are about to move responsibility for social mobility back to the Cabinet Office. I do not object to that, but the truth is that education, as I describe it, plays a central role in delivering social mobility, or it ought to do so. Yet the Tory Government's own Social Mobility Commission concluded that inequality now extends from birth through to work, and that our class structures are ossified. The ossified stratification of our society is an ancient British problem.

That suggests that not every human being is achieving their full potential. To that extent, their education has to be judged as not working properly, unless we take the view—I do not think many in this House do—that the children of the wealthiest are somehow more genetically endowed than the children of the poorest. If we took that view, we could say that the stratification reflected the genetic inheritance of each child, but that is clearly not the case. The truth is that millions of people's potential is not being realised because our education system is not working properly.

Before I talk about a distributional analysis of how we spend our money, it is worth restating that I do not take the view—very few people would—that each person's attainment is determined purely by the amount of money we spend. The way we deliver education must of course be continually developed, analysed and fully understood. Without adequate funding, however, the rest of it must fail. The truth is that the amount of funding we are discussing today will determine the number of staff working in education, and their morale. If the number of staff is in decline and their morale low, that will cast a shadow through every classroom in the country. I think there is some evidence that that is the case, although we have brilliant teachers, staff, children and parents. Over the term of this Government, from 2010, the amount of funding per child has fallen, and it is still falling.

What was the impact of those cuts? I do not want to talk about university funding, because that is largely done in a different way, through student borrowing and so on. There are, broadly, three sectors: early years, schools and further education. There is an increase in provision for early years, but the truth is that the cuts have been savage. The first months and years of a person's life absolutely determine how much progress they will make in educational attainment, but the cuts have cut deep. Childcare costs are soaring, and many families simply cannot afford their childcare needs. Even since 12 months ago, there are 4,000 fewer childcare providers in place.

Let me skip schools for a second and go on to FE. There will probably not be many people in the House with my background. I left school with no qualifications, but eventually I ended up doing a first and then a second degree. What was the stepping stone for me, having left school with no qualifications? It was further education—a college that took an interest in me after I

[Jon Trickett]

failed, effectively, or was failed by the school system. There are millions of people in the same position who would like to do more, whether they have left school, changed profession or simply want to catch up. However, under this Government's austerity programme, FE funding has been cut by two thirds. That stepping stone has almost been removed. Many people in my patch and throughout the country simply do not have access to a college as I did when I was a younger man.

Let me turn briefly to schools and the main point that I want to develop. Do not take my word for it; the House of Commons Library briefing for today's debate quotes the Institute for Fiscal Studies. It is quite shocking, but in its placid, bureaucratic language the IFS states:

"Deprived schools have seen larger cuts over the last decade. The most deprived secondary schools saw a 14% real-terms fall in spending per pupil"

over the 10 years up to 2020, compared to a 9% cut for the least deprived schools. So the most deprived schools have had a 14% cut and the least deprived schools have had a 9% cut. It goes on to state that the national funding formula simply repeats all those problems, providing increases of 8% to 9% for the least deprived schools and 5% for the most deprived, and that the pupil premium has failed to keep pace with inflation. In dry language, the quote in the House of Commons Library briefing states that these patterns of funding "run counter" to the Government's so-called central objective of levelling up poorer areas. We have a Prime Minister and an Administration who regularly talk about levelling up, but they have to will the means to achieve a levelling-up programme. That is not happening.

Let me illustrate the impact on an area such as the one I represent. I am one of four MPs from the Wakefield district, and Wakefield Council is the 54th most deprived council area in the country. When we look at levels of educational attainment, we see that one in five people get to national vocational qualification level 4. The national figure is twice that, and the levels of attainment in Uxbridge, the Prime Minister's constituency, are 250% higher than those in my constituency. Given the levels of deprivation and attainment that I mentioned, we would think that Wakefield Council would get more money, rather than less, in the distribution of school funding, but that is not the case. The cuts to schools in the Prime Minister's Uxbridge constituency amounted to £276 a child. In my constituency, they amounted to £514, which is almost twice as much. How can that be right?

I will put on my Facebook page an analysis of the cuts in our area to every school. However, to take one at random, St Helen's Primary School in Hemsworth—I know the school, which is in a great community, with lovely parents and vital, vibrant children—has had £746 cut per pupil since the cuts began, and yet 38% of the children are on free school meals. That deprived community is doing its best against a Government who are cutting, cutting and cutting. Why should children in an area such as the one I represent, and in deprived areas up and down the country that are lacking in social mobility, have to face cuts on that scale while children in the Prime Minister's constituency—a better-off community, with higher levels of attainment than in mine—do not?

The truth is that the Government have presided over the most prolonged and savage cuts to education since at least the war. They have cheated the children, staff and parents in deprived communities everywhere for the benefit of those who live in the least deprived, most well-off communities. That is not right; it is immoral. Today's estimates fail dismally to make proper provision for the damage that the Conservatives have done since they took power in 2010.

2.13 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place and congratulate her on her promotion. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this debate; I have always admired his passion and commitment on all issues relating to education and social mobility. He speaks from the heart most of the time, but I thought that he made a valiant case for the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), given what we know about what went on in Downing Street last night.

During their time in secondary school, a year 11 pupil who finished their GCSEs in the past couple of weeks will have seen five—yes, five—Education Secretaries in charge of policy and spending that have a significant and lasting impact on their lives. Any state school that got through that many headteachers in such a short period would certainly have been put into special measures by now, yet this chaotic Government limp on. Time and again, we see the Department for Education, sadly, notched up as a temporary staging post on the climb up the greasy pole for ambitious Ministers.

That is a depressing and damning indictment of the way in which the Government view children and young people and their education. It is indicative of the short-term thinking that pervades a Government who are focused on campaigning, rather than governing. However, with our children being our most precious resource—the future of our nation—on whose shoulders our future economic success will be built, not only should the Department for Education be viewed as the most coveted brief, to be mastered and championed relentlessly over many years, but it should be funded as a long-term investment.

Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major told *The Times* Education Commission that education expenditure should be seen

"as capital investment, on the basis that its effect will linger for a lifetime".

I could not agree more, so as we consider the education estimates, I ask: where is the ambition for our children and young people? Why is it—as the right hon. Member for Harlow said—that according to the IFS, by 2025, over a period of 15 years, we will effectively have seen less than 3% growth in education spending while health spending will have risen by 42% in the same period?

It is time that we viewed our children's future in the same way that we view key infrastructure projects. Human capital—for want of a better phrase—invested in properly, will deliver a significant return for our economy and society. However, it does not fit into three-year spending cycles or four to five-year parliamentary cycles—although we seem to be on two-year parliamentary cycles at the moment, and who knows? We might be in a general election this time next week.

Turning to catch-up funding, the long-term economic impact has been laid out starkly by the Education Policy Institute. It calculates that without sufficient investment and support, children could lose up to £40,000 of income over their lifetimes, equating to about a £350 billion loss to the economy. With pupils having missed out on millions of days of face-to-face teaching, and with the Department for Education, frankly, failing to act swiftly to support schools or put a proper catch-up plan in place quickly, the attainment gap is widening.

The National Audit Office said in its report last year that the Government did not take action to enable vulnerable learners to attend school and to fund online resources quickly enough. They could have done more in some areas. The NAO recommended that the Department

“takes swift and effective action, including to learn wider lessons from its COVID-19 response, and to ensure that the catch-up learning programme is effective and reaches the children who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged.”

Just yesterday, we saw the first set of SATs results since the pandemic, showing a steep decline in the number of children achieving the expected standard at key stage 2.

Alongside the educational gap, children have paid a very high price in terms of wellbeing and mental health. That is a top priority for headteachers in my constituency. Parents are at their wits' end. I have talked about this month in, month out in the Chamber, and we all know the NHS statistics that show that the number of children with a mental health condition has risen from one in nine to one in six since 2017.

Despite all that, we barely hear any mention of catch-up support for our children and young people. The Government want to stop talking about covid—sadly, covid is still with us, although the Government want to move on—but our children and young people will bear the scars of their sacrifices during the pandemic for a very long time. As the EPI suggested, many will pay the price for the rest of their lives, so we owe it to them to heed the advice of the Government's adviser, Sir Kevan Collins, who felt compelled—like many Ministers now—to quit in his capacity as a Government adviser because they would not take his recommendations seriously and put in the investment in children and young people that I have mentioned. He said that he did not believe

“that a successful recovery can be achieved with a programme of support of this size.”

I remind the House that he recommended that £15 billion be invested in education recovery, but we have seen a commitment to only a third of that.

We know that children and young people fare better when parents are empowered to engage with their education. That is one reason why the Liberal Democrats have called not just for the £15 billion commitment to be made immediately, but for some of that money to go towards vouchers to be put directly in the hands of parents to support their children, whether that is with tuition, sport, art or music, with whatever they need for their physical wellbeing and social engagement with their peers, or with counselling to tackle mental health issues with the advice and support of their school. Our children and young people are suffering a double whammy: they have felt the impact of the pandemic, and now they are at the sharp end of the cost of living crisis.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): In my constituency, many children are going to school and having their only meal of the day there, because of the crisis that this Government have forced on the residents of our constituencies. Does the hon. Member agree that it is absurd that that is happening? Many schools are not even opening for the full five days.

Munira Wilson: The hon. Gentleman must be psychic or have very good eyesight, because he has pre-empted what I was about to say about free school meals. About 2.6 million children are in families that experience food insecurity; as he says, the reality is that many children are going to school hungry, because parents are struggling to put food on the table. Hunger and poor nutrition affect children's ability to learn, their development and their mental health. How can our most disadvantaged children, who already have a much bigger gap in attainment as a result of the pandemic, be expected to catch up? I pay tribute to the schools and teachers up and down the country who are working their socks off to put additional support and interventions in place to help them to catch up, but how can children who are going to school with empty tummies and sitting hungry in lessons be expected to benefit from the catch-up?

I sincerely hope that the Government will think again and take the advice of yet another Government adviser they chose to ignore: Henry Dimbleby, who advised them on their food strategy. He recommended that every child in a family in receipt of universal credit should be entitled to a free school meal. To be honest, I am shocked that that is not already the case. I really urge the Secretary of State: if she does one thing in her first few days, please will she address that? It is a scandal that children are going to school hungry.

The Ark John Archer Primary Academy in Clapham is not in my constituency, but I visited it recently because I was told about the fantastic early years offer that it is developing; Ark has invested money, alongside the Government's paltry investment in early years, to support some of the poorest children. The headteacher asked me why, although some two-year-olds are eligible to receive 15 hours of free childcare a week because they are from disadvantaged backgrounds, we are not providing them with free school meals. It just seems really odd. The school is funding meals for everybody, right across its nursery and primary provision. Whether the child is eligible or not, they are making sure that every child gets a healthy, nutritious meal.

The school pointed out to me that with some childcare providers, disadvantaged two-year-olds who are getting free childcare are having to bring in a packed lunch—quite possibly not a very nutritious one, but with cheap things that the parents can afford—and will be sitting alongside children whose parents are able to pay for their childcare and who are getting a far better lunch. I find that contrast between the haves and the have-nots really quite distasteful. When the Education Secretary looks at free school meals, will she look at the case of two-year-olds?

As has been said many times in this place, our childcare costs are among the highest in the world. In the cost of living crisis, parents are struggling even more to make ends meet with their nursery and childcare fees. Liberal Democrat analysis of Coram statistics suggests that parents in inner London who fund 50 hours per week of

[*Munira Wilson*]

childcare will have seen an increase in costs of almost £2,000—I will say that again: £2,000—over the past year. That is just shocking. The problem is that as childcare costs go up and parents struggle to make ends meet with their mortgage or rent, their food and their other bills, fewer and fewer children will be put into childcare. That is bad for a range of reasons.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I could not agree more about the cost of childcare. Does she agree that the answer to the problem is not to decrease the staff-student ratio? I was taken on a tour of Robin nursery in Kidlington the other day; Teresa, the wonderful person who runs it, was concerned that if that ratio goes down, she will not be able to give the safe and caring level of care that parents need. She is concerned that, unfortunately, it will be the most disadvantaged students who lose out, because they are quite often the ones who do not yet have the help with special educational needs and disabilities that they need, and they are the ones who need the most love.

Munira Wilson: I could not agree more. The Government are trying to tackle the issue of childcare funding in completely the wrong way. My hon. Friend makes the point about safety and the ability to support children with SEND. Given the razor-thin margins with which so many childcare providers operate—we know that they are going under all the time—if the Government power ahead with this after their consultation, and if they really think that the saving will be passed on to parents to help with the cost of living, they are living in cloud cuckoo land, because of exactly what my hon. Friend says.

I have given the example of my son's childminder before. She has to do all this jiggery-pokery with her invoices every month, because she has been told categorically that she cannot make it clear that I have to pay to top up the 30 hours of "free" childcare that we are meant to be getting, because it does not cover her costs. It is an add-on. That is fine—I have no problem with paying it; I am in a position to pay for it—but the point is that many parents will not be able to afford that top-up or will end up putting their children into what might be fairly low-quality childcare. Our most disadvantaged children are the ones who need the most high-quality input. By the time children start school, the most disadvantaged are about 11 months behind their peers. That gap continues to widen, which has been accelerated by the pandemic.

There is a really important point to make here. Childcare is not just about babysitting. It is about high-quality early years input, with properly trained staff who should have an early years qualification; who should not be on poverty wages, as so many are; and who should have continuous professional development so that they can pick up on things like developmental delays in speech and language, which have become even more prevalent as a result of the pandemic.

It should be about investing in our early years to help children to get on in life, but also about supporting parents who wish to go to work from when their children are at a very young age. We know that people—mostly

women, sadly—are leaving the workforce or reducing their hours in very large numbers. Once again, that takes us back to the economic argument for long-term investment in children and in education. It will be harmful for our economy that fewer women will be in work and setting up businesses, because so many are having to give up work to look after their children. Finally, let me return to where I started. The Government say that they want to help Britain back to work and they say that they want to tackle the task of levelling up. The former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is now the Chancellor, has talked about children, skills and education being his passion, and I hope he will put his money where his mouth is. He is now in the Treasury, which was the biggest blocker preventing him and his many predecessors from doing the right thing by children. They are our future. They will be the innovators, they will continue to make this country great, and every single child, regardless of background, deserves the very best start in life.

If the Secretary of State will not listen to me, I ask her to listen to the Government's own advisers, such as Kevan Collins on catch-up, Henry Dimbleby on free school meals, and Josh MacAlister on children's social care; so many children are simply written off by the system because we have a broken social care system. I ask her to step up now, to make the necessary investment in children and young people, and to end this Conservative chaos. Our children are depending on it.

2.30 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place. I hope she has an ambitious plan for however many hours she will be in office before the downfall of her Government—but this is no laughing matter. The fact that we have had three Education Secretaries in three years tells us all we need to know about the Conservatives' priorities. Theirs is a party with no plan, no ambition and no vision for our children. In contrast, education is so important to us on this side of the House that we say it three times.

Let us start with childcare and the early years, a time of indisputable importance with an impact that lasts a lifetime. The Government's unforgivable failure to support early years providers shamefully saw 4,000 of them close over the last year. When parents are paying more on childcare than on their rent or their mortgage, the system is truly broken. The prohibitive cost of childcare means that many young couples face a choice between being priced out of parenting and being priced out of work. If they cannot afford the childcare costs to return to work, or if those costs outweigh the salaries that they bring home, work simply does not pay, no matter how many times the rhetoric is repeated at the Dispatch Box.

Ours is statistically one of the most expensive countries in the world in which to raise children, with net childcare costs representing 29% of income. We should compare that with 11% in France, 9% in Belgium and just 1% in Germany. If families cannot afford the childcare—for instance, the before and after-school clubs that boost children's learning and development—the attainment gap grows. Those children will arrive at school to find that funding per pupil has fallen by 9% in real terms since the Tories came to power. That means that, by 2024, school budgets will have seen no overall growth in 15—yes, 15—years.

Meanwhile, many young people are still catching up from the lockdown school closures. Lockdown was temporary, but it could have a lifelong impact: the Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that students who lost six months of schooling could see a reduction in lifetime income of 4%. However, the catch-up programme does not even come close to meeting “the scale of the challenge”.

Those are not my words, but the words of the Government’s own education recovery tsar, whose resignation a year ago is all the evidence that anyone needs when considering whether the scale of the challenge is really understood.

Why is it that our children, teachers and schools are treated as an afterthought at every stage by this Government? The crumbs of catch-up support that are available will let down an entire generation of young people and, on the Government’s watch, the pandemic’s impact on their education will be lifelong. In contrast, Labour’s children’s recovery plan will provide breakfast clubs and new activities for every child, small-group tutoring for all who need it, quality mental health support in every school, continued development for teachers—that is essential, given that a staggering 40% of teachers leave the profession within five years—and an education recovery premium, targeting investment at children who risk falling behind. Those are not just warm words. Under the last Labour Government, our rhetoric matched the reality: 3,500 Sure Start centres were delivered on time, offering a place in every community for integrated care and services for children and their families.

Now is the time to be ambitious about education in a post-covid modern society. I believe that we should be putting tech at the heart of learning, tailoring classrooms to the modern day by ensuring that every child has the kit and the connectivity to get online. We should be challenging the norm by considering qualifications in tech and coding, providing real-world work experience, and using our ability to connect and learn with and from others around the world. The 21st-century opportunities for children, for teachers and for education should be endless. If there were a competent and functioning Government to take on that challenge, we would be there; but we are not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will now proceed to the winding-up speeches. I call Carol Monaghan.

2.35 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Let me begin by welcoming the new Secretary of State to her position. She has been committed and diligent in her role as Universities Minister, and I am sure she will bring the same commitment to this role. I know that she has spoken out strongly in favour of skills education, and I am sure that many of us will be watching with anticipation over the next few months.

Let me also congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). As always, he spoke with knowledge and passion, and I concur with much of what he said. He talked a great deal about the number of children who are absent from school, and I want to drill down into that. In the case of some children, absence is due to illness and not being able to connect properly with schools. There are

many instances in which, if we had better links between schools and homes, young people would have better access to education. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), I have done a great deal of work on the issue of children who are excluded owing to that condition through no fault of their own, and I hope we can do some cross-party work on the subject. There are other reasons for children not to be at school. An issue that persists in England, but does not happen in Scotland, is the off-rolling of children. Off-rolling to massage school results or to get rid of the problem is not good enough. These young people should still be the responsibility of the local authority and of the school, and the school should be doing outreach to ensure that they can access education. This has to stop.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Mersden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the importance of educating the whole person. She mentioned additional services such as after-school clubs. We need to be clear about those. They are not a nice add-on; they are key to the development of young people. With a different hat on, I am a volunteer coach at a local gymnastics club. Unfortunately, owing to the cost of living crisis, we are seeing young people not turning up—young people unable to access important activities delivered both in and outside schools. Such activities build young people’s resilience, they build healthy lifestyles, and they help those young people to communicate, collaborate and work with others. As I have said, they are key to development, and they should not be ignored. Amid all the talk about what is offered in schools, we must also look at what is offered outside schools for the development of a young person.

Schools are, of course, not immune to inflation and the cost of living crisis. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the 2021 spending review included an extra £4.4 billion for the schools budget in 2024-25, as compared with previous plans. While that may sound like a win, the IFS has also said that

“it will mean 15 years with no overall growth in spending. This squeeze on school resources is effectively without precedent in post-war UK history.”

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) detailed some of the other comments that the IFS has made, including the fact that deprived schools have seen larger cuts over the last decade. I will not repeat his comments, but what he said about funding in different areas was extremely important. If we are talking about equal opportunities for those from different backgrounds, this must be looked at. Conversely, in Scotland, the Scottish Government figures on education spending show that 2020-21 was the sixth year in a row that education expenditure saw a real-terms increase. This is important, and the money that has been directed to individual schools to help them to tackle issues such as child poverty and after-school clubs makes up part of that picture.

The problem is that the IFS figures and the Budget figures do not talk about child poverty, which is the biggest issue that will affect a child’s life chances and attainment. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) talked about free school meals, and this is something that is really important to us in Scotland. We have identified that this must take place, and since January every youngster in primary 1 to primary 5 in

[Carol Monaghan]

Scotland gets a free school lunch, regardless of income. That will be rolled out to every primary pupil over this parliamentary term.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I wonder whether my hon. Friend was in the Chamber on the day that a Government Minister was ridiculing the Scottish Government for the amount of money they spent on what were called welfare payments, which would include providing free school meals for those children in years 1 to 5. Does she agree that, whatever a Government invest their money in, the primary thing they should invest in is their people and their children?

Carol Monaghan: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and it is not just about the money. As she says, it is about the value we are putting on those youngsters as well. In Scotland, that starts right from the moment when parents are given a baby box, followed by the Scottish Government's commitment to childcare and free school meals, and now we have the Scottish child payment of £20 a week for every eligible child, which is transformational for families in need. Of course that only goes a little way towards tackling the cost of living crisis, but we know that hungry children cannot learn, so free school meals must be central to this and it would be good to see some movement on that from this Government.

We also have to look at skills for the future. No party or Government who have forced through a devastating Brexit in the middle of a pandemic can credibly claim to be focused on recovery. A fair recovery must be investment-led. At the centre of Scotland's plan is fair work, which is why the Scottish Government have invested £500 million to support new jobs and retrain people for jobs for the future, as well as funding the young person's guarantee of a free university, college, apprenticeship or training place for every young person. This is not about loans; it is about investment, and with 93% of our young people in training, employment or education—the highest in the UK—it is paying off.

Gareth Thomas: On the hon. Lady's point about skills for the future, I am sure that she and others across the House will agree that more trade with India is essential to our economic growth in this country, so does she not think it is disappointing that there has been such a steep decline in the teaching and examinations of those who want to learn Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu, which are some of the key modern languages of India? Is there not a case for the Government to look at a discrete package—very small is all it would have to be—to help to reverse that trend? It could include support for those who teach on a Saturday, often at weekend schools, and professional development for the teachers, as well as support to pay for the cost of the places where that teaching takes place.

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman obviously speaks with great experience and knowledge of this area. That is knowledge I do not necessarily have, but I cannot see any problem with our young people learning languages and skills and developing links with other cultures, so this is only to be welcomed and promoted.

In Scotland we have invested more than £800 million in our further education estate since the SNP Scottish Government came to power in 2007. An equivalent

investment in FE in England would be around £8 billion, not the £1.5 billion this Government have committed. It would be really good to know how the college estate in England is going to be brought up to the standards of the colleges we now have in Scotland, because we have world-leading facilities and brand-new colleges. Thousands of students are getting not just HNCs and HNDs but degrees in further education colleges such as Glasgow Clyde College in my constituency, City of Glasgow College in the centre of Glasgow and Glasgow Kelvin College in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). I do wonder how England can hope to compete with these colleges and be truly committed to skills development without better investment.

For young people in England who want to go to university, the threat of debt is ever present. The average graduate debt—depending on the figures we look at—is somewhere between £45,000 and £50,000 for a young person in England, but what is of greater concern is the huge number of graduates who now have much higher debts than that. This year for the first time we have seen more than 6,500 graduates with debts of more than £100,000. Inflation is rocketing, and over the next few years debts will only get worse.

I raised the issue at Education questions on Monday and the Minister, now Secretary of State, responded that she had to get the right balance between the graduate and the taxpayer, but that raises a fundamental question on the purpose of education: is it about individual gain or about societal good? Nurses, doctors and teachers, who do not command great salaries, should not be expected to bear the burden of this debt in order to provide a public service. According to the IFS, 87% of graduates will not pay back their student loans within the 30-year payback period, so what do this Government do? They lower the repayment threshold and extend the payback period to 40 years. They plan to tackle graduate debt by saddling young people with ever-increasing amounts of it. That cannot be right.

My final comments are about science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—education. I know this is something that gets strong cross-party support, but I find it concerning—I declare an interest as a physics teacher—that the Government's own social mobility tsar has talked about girls not taking physics because they do not like the “hard maths”. I want to hear from this Government how they are going to tackle that and increase the numbers of girls in physics. We have been talking about this issue since I was a pupil at school, and things have not shifted. We have tried the carrot and it has not helped, so perhaps we now need to look at the stick if we are to get more girls into doing physics. This Government need a different approach to post-16 education funding, to provide long-term security and put the interests of learners at the heart of everything. Education must be restored as a force for public good and, as such, it must be publicly funded to provide real lifelong access for all.

2.49 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this debate. Like any good educator, this morning he gave renewed meaning to the adage,

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” He has also given us an opportunity to discuss departmental spending at a critical moment for school budgets.

I welcome the Secretary of State for Education to her place, while noting the absence of any departmental Ministers alongside her. The personnel in this dysfunctional, merry-go-round Government may be changing faster than any of us can keep up with, but the facts and figures speak for themselves.

The Department for Education is one of the four big spenders, so its spending is a good way to understand the Government’s priorities and choices. Even a passing look suggests that children and their education are not among those priorities, and that this Government’s choices are not made with their interests in mind.

We have heard a range of views and concerns from Members on both sides of the House in this debate. The right hon. Member for Harlow, the Chair of the Education Committee, spoke of the pandemic’s impact on young people, and specifically children from disadvantaged backgrounds. He spoke about skyrocketing school energy bills and their impact on school budgets, and his hope that the new Chancellor will now invest in our nation’s schools. He also spoke about the value of breakfast provision, which Labour’s children’s recovery plan fully recognises.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) spoke powerfully about the importance of every child fulfilling their potential and how, in so many cases, young people are missing out. He recognised our country’s brilliant teachers and the impact on morale of cuts to school budgets.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke with her usual passion about the value of childcare and the huge pressure of childcare costs on families. She also raised the crumbs of catch-up this Government are offering, compared with Labour’s ambitious children’s recovery plan, to meet the generational challenges head on. As shadow Schools Minister, I hope colleagues will not mind if I focus on that first.

For the last decade, successive Governments have repeatedly asked schools to do more with less. School spending per pupil was down almost 10% in the decade to 2020, which is reflected in the reality of what parents, teachers and hon. Members report. I am sure the new Secretary of State will be keen to tell us about the 2021 spending review, as the now former Schools Minister, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), was forced to fall back on it more than four times in response to the realities reported to him by hon. Members at departmental questions earlier this week. The Secretary of State knows full well that, even factoring in the spending review, the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that by 2024 per pupil funding will remain similar to a decade ago, which will mean 15 years without overall growth in spending, the most sustained squeeze on school resources at any time since the second world war.

What is more, the broken national funding formula means the least deprived schools will receive more money than the most deprived, to the tune of almost 5% by 2023. Despite rehashed announcements on levelling up—big on rhetoric but low on delivery—the bottom line is that this Government will continue to hollow out areas of historical deprivation when it comes to education funding and recovery.

As ever, annual statistics paint only part of the picture. In addition to the historic squeeze on funding, school budgets face further pressure as a result of the cost of living crisis, made worse by Downing Street, with national insurance up, energy prices soaring, childcare costs through the roof, food prices up and universal credit support slashed. It is a perfect storm for families, schools and businesses, and the real cost is measured in the opportunities for our nation’s children.

That is why, as part of Labour’s wider offer to tackle the cost of living crisis, we would invest in childcare places for young children on free school meals. And because we know childcare pressure does not stop when children start school, we would invest in before-school and after-school clubs for children, too.

Millions of young people have just finished sitting exams and assessments for the first time since 2019. After the disruption of the pandemic, it is a credit to our young people that they are rising to the unprecedented challenges they face. We are so proud of them all, but this Government have consistently let them down.

Ministers’ miserable failure to help children recover lost learning threatens to limit their opportunities. The IFS found that an average loss of six months of schooling could reduce children’s lifetime income by 4%, which equates to a total of £350 billion in lost earnings for 8.7 million school-age children in the UK. This is the stark scale of the generational challenge we now face.

The Government’s ambition should have matched that challenge, yet the total package of so-called catch-up funding equates to just £300 per pupil. That is just £1 for each day out of school. We can compare that with the £1,685 per pupil recommended by the education recovery commissioner, or the £1,800 per pupil in the US and the £2,100 per pupil in the Netherlands.

It is no wonder Sir Kevan Collins resigned more than a year ago. His plan was rejected by the then Chancellor, who told us he had “maxed out” on support for our nation’s children. At the time of his resignation, Sir Kevan said the Government’s plans were

“too narrow, too small and will be delivered too slowly.”

His warnings have proved to be spot on.

The Government’s flagship national tutoring programme has also failed children and taxpayers. The latest figures suggest the Prime Minister’s blustery target of 100 million hours of tutoring will not be met until all children currently at secondary school have left. Worse still, Ministers plan to pull the rug out from under schools that are working hard to deliver the scheme. Tapering funding means that schools will be covering 90% of the costs within three years. With eye-watering bills, and with food and other day-to-day costs rising, there is a real possibility that schools will struggle to deliver the scheme. It is children in the classroom who will suffer. By contrast, Labour’s children’s recovery plan would deliver small group tutoring through schools for all who need it right now. That is alongside quality mental health support in every school and targeted extra support for those who suffered most from lost learning.

As schools continue to face the pinch, so do families. As hon. Members have raised in this debate, childcare is critical for learning and development, but it is also intrinsically linked to our wider economic prosperity. Before the pandemic, children on free school meals arrived at school almost five months behind their peers.

[Stephen Morgan]

Spiralling costs will only make this worse. The average cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two has risen almost £1,500 over the last five years. In fact, the UK has one of the highest childcare costs as a proportion of average income. At 29%, we are 19 percentage points higher than the OECD average.

This is perpetuating the gross inequality that is holding women back. Some 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues, and we lose £28.2 billion in economic output as a result. The latest bright idea to cut the number of adults looking after groups of children will likely reduce the quality of provision and will have no impact on availability or affordability for parents.

The former Education Secretary liked to claim he was evidence-led. Although I know the current Secretary of State's interest in data is probably limited to the number of Government resignations since this debate began, I will give her some figures all the same. Pregnant Then Screwed has said that, following the proposed ratio changes, only 2% of nurseries and preschools will lower fees for parents. Even where they do, it will be by just £2 a week. It simply does not add up.

This chaotic, rudderless Government are cutting off their nose to spite their face. Ministers' repeated failure to prevent disruption and mitigate spiralling costs threatens to hold children back now and for the rest of their lives. That is a problem for opportunities in the classroom, but it is also an issue for our wider economy. Government is about priorities and choices. In government, Labour made the choice to transform education, and we would do so again. Our ambitious, costed plans would put children at the centre of a vision for Britain. Recognising the challenges, taking responsibility and securing children's future, that is Labour's approach. It is time the Government put their money where their mouth is and matched our commitment to securing our children's future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on her appointment as Secretary of State for Education and call her to reply to the debate.

2.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Michelle Donelan): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me start by saying thank you for the welcome I have received today and by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for opening this important debate. He and I share a lifelong deep passion for education, given our own experiences, and that is why education has always been my personal focus, through our time on the Education Committee, and during my time as Minister for children and families, as Minister for universities and, more recently, as Minister for higher and further education.

I am here today because of the countless teachers, lecturers, school staff, administrative staff, parents, pupils and all those who keep our education system running. They are looking to Westminster today for reassurance that their priorities matter. Exam results day is coming, and covid recovery is ongoing, so I stand here today because I cannot let them down. That is why I believe it is vital that the stories and experiences of real people do

not get lost in today's debate. Forget the Westminster bubble, if you are a parent of a disabled child wondering what this Government are doing to make your local school better equipped and more inclusive, this is the debate for you. If you are a young person building the foundations of your career at college or at university, and wondering what this Government are doing to improve the quality and value of the qualifications you receive, this debate is for you.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on her new appointment. I serve the most income-deprived constituency in the country, yet I am very proud that my constituency sent more children to university than any other constituency in the west midlands last year. In an interview earlier this year, she said that many of the degrees that those students study were Mickey Mouse degrees. Which degrees was she referring to?

Michelle Donelan: I have been very consistent on this subject and will continue to be so; every young person deserves to know that when they pick a degree course it is of a high quality. Low-quality courses do nothing to progress social mobility; all they do is limit opportunities, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would not want for his constituents.

If you are an adult wondering what this Government are doing to help you gain that new job, high wage or new career, this debate is for you. In my maiden speech, I said that it should not matter where someone comes from, it is where they are going that counts, and I said that education is absolutely key. I said all those years ago that what it boils down to is that it is so important that MPs, from across the House, focus on opening doors for our society and opening up opportunities.

Layla Moran: I, too, extend my congratulations to the right hon. Lady. When I asked my county council what was the single most important thing we could do to help the SEND backlog, it gave me one thing to relay to this Government: we should increase the number of educational psychologists. I hear her passion, so will she put that on her to-do list urgently and increase their number, not just to the 200 more that we have now, because that is not enough? We need to supercharge the number of educational psychologists available across the country, to help tackle that SEND backlog.

Michelle Donelan: I will be looking at everything in the coming days and weeks. As the hon. Lady will know, mental health was one of my key priorities in my former role. I recognise the importance of supporting the wellbeing and mental health of young people to their going on and succeeding in education.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I join other Members in congratulating my right hon. Friend on her appointment as Secretary of State for Education, which is probably the best job in Government, apart from children's Minister. Opening doors for children in education is key, but making sure that we do not close them is equally important. We learnt from the pandemic that closing schools left a legacy for our children that we do not want to be associated with. Will she look seriously at making sure that that does not happen again, by giving schools the same stature as nuclear power stations

and other parts of our essential national infrastructure, so that as Government policy we do not close them again en masse?

Michelle Donelan: I am not the only Minister to have gone on record to say that they believed it was a mistake we made as a Government to close schools, and we certainly will not do that again. I will certainly look at my hon. Friend's suggestion.

The estimates I commend today put the power of investment behind those principles. We are opening the doors of opportunity and building an education system that focuses on where someone as an individual wants to go, not on where they came from. Excluding the student loan book impairment charges, the Department's resources have increased by a staggering £5.4 billion and capital has increased by £1.1 billion since the estimates last year. This is the first year of our three-year spending review settlement, which provides an astonishing £18.4 billion cash increase for the Department over the Parliament. The total core schools budget is increasing to £56.8 billion by 2024-25, which is a £7 billion cash increase compared with last year. This increase in funding has been front-loaded, to get money to schools rapidly, because we want a country in which where someone is going is not determined by where they came from. That starts with the investment in the crucial early years. We are committed to an additional £170 million by 2024-25.

Gareth Thomas: I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on her appointment. On the issue of her to-do list, I am sure that teacher recruitment and retention will be one thing she seeks to look at. May I raise with her the issue of the particular challenge that schools in outer London have in competing with schools from inner London for teachers? More funding is traditionally allocated to inner London than to outer London for salary costs. Will she examine that issue and recognise that living in outer London now is just as costly as living in inner London and that schools in constituencies such as mine should not be at a disadvantage compared with those in nearby or neighbouring boroughs that qualify as being inner London when it comes to offering good salary packages to teachers in the future?

Michelle Donelan: I will take on board the hon. Gentleman's comments and add them to my ever-growing "to-do list", as he so kindly puts it.

We are also investing £2.6 billion of capital between 2022 and 2025 for SEND. When it comes to supporting all of our children, young people and adults, schools and families, I am here, because I believe we must send a clear message today that their priorities are what we are focused on in this place. We are therefore making the investments required to entirely transform our further and higher education systems, towards a model that no other country has ever attempted.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State warmly on her appointment. Will she take an urgent meeting with me on the subject of further and higher education in Malvern? Malvern Hills College, which has been going for almost 100 years, was passed over to the Warwickshire College Group a few years ago, with a covenant that the site

should be used only for education purposes. WCG, having closed the college, is trying not only to sell the site, but to sue my district council. Will she take an urgent meeting?

Michelle Donelan: I would be only too delighted to take an urgent meeting on a matter that sounds extremely urgent.

Before the intervention, I was speaking about the lifelong loan entitlement, which is going to be introduced from 2025. Once it is introduced, we will be the first major country in the world to provide every working-age individual with a pot of cash to draw down to use for their education throughout their life, allowing everyone to share in the life-changing skills on offer at our world-class colleges and universities.

Robert Halfon: I welcome the lifetime skills commitment, but when will there be clarity on the future status of the international baccalaureate career-related programme I mentioned in my opening speech? Given the Government's commitment to skills and vocational education, was consideration given to exempting the career-related programme of the international baccalaureate from the approval process for level 3 qualifications?

Michelle Donelan: I will be looking at that in the coming days and hope to be able to update my right hon. Friend shortly. As a result of the lifelong loan entitlement, the UK will be upskilling and reskilling, supercharging our workforce, where the true potential of education to support social mobility, improve skills and beat the cost of living crisis will be unleashed.

Schools and early years are the power behind the great engine of social mobility in this country. I would not be standing here today had it not been for the inspiring teachers who helped me, lifted me up and supported me throughout my school education, and I know many Members across this House feel the same. That is why core funding for schools will rise by an extraordinary £4.7 billion by 2024-25 compared with previously announced plans, and this year, 2022-23, the schools budget will increase by £2.4 billion. The 2020-21 spending review increases that further with another £1.6 billion for the coming year. This will go directly to schools to help them respond to the pressures that so many of them are facing, especially at this time.

Edward Timpson: I agree that the certainty that those budgetary increases year on year provide schools in my constituency and across the country is extremely important, but the Department is also responsible, almost entirely, for the budget for the primary PE and sport premium, which is worth £320 million per year and is helping improve the quality of physical education activity and sport in our primary schools. Until now, apart from one occasion when there was a three-year settlement, we have had a cycle of schools waiting once to year to find out whether they could continue courses or keep staff for another academic year. Will the Secretary of State look at that as part of her lengthening to-do list and see if there is a way, working with other Departments including particularly the Department of Health and Social Care, to ensure that budget commitment can be more than just annually and instead be made further into the future, as is the footing for the school budget more generally?

Michelle Donelan: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, especially in terms of our efforts to tackle childhood obesity. I will take that issue forward over the coming days and look at it.

Families hold our country together and form the basis of a child's future, and indeed the futures of all of us: invest in families and by proxy we will be investing in the rest of a child's life. My focus will therefore be on lifting up families in need to ensure that children get the same opportunities and support regardless of where they come from. That is why we are investing over £200 million a year in our holiday activities and food programme, providing free school holiday club places with enriching activities and healthy meals for children who receive benefits-related free school meals. All 152 local authorities in England are delivering this programme, leaving no child behind because of where they come from.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment to her new role. One of my passions is early intervention, and in Rotherham we have a fantastic early-intervention team that works with families pre-birth to make sure that every child has the necessary support around them when they get to school. I am a huge fan of the Sure Start system; can the Minister assure us that early-intervention systems will get the money they need under her guardianship?

Michelle Donelan: I certainly can give that reassurance. The evidence highlights the importance of those formative years, which is why we rolled out the family hubs programme and have listened carefully to the evidence. We also continue to invest in early education, with an additional £170 million by 2024-25 to increase the hourly funding rates.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) mentioned many things in his opening speech that I am particularly passionate about and that he will know I have mentioned before, including the pupil premium and breakfast clubs. He also referred to ghost children, and I want to address that in particular. Far from being ghosts, these children are, of course, flesh and blood, and they must be supported back into school so they, too, can go on and seize those opportunities and reach for the stars.

We are currently implementing a comprehensive attendance strategy to ensure no child is left behind and to tackle the root causes of non-attendance once and for all. We have established an alliance of national leaders from education, children and social care, and allied services to work together to raise school attendance and reduce persistent absence. Measures to establish a registration system for children who are not in school were included in the Schools Bill that was introduced in the other place on 11 May. I agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of these measures and those that have previously been announced to ensure no child falls through the cracks. In fact, that will be the theme of my leadership of this Department: ensuring no child falls through the cracks in our education system.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) rightly raised the importance of covid recovery in education. Our core funding sits alongside a further targeted package

of £2 billion over the spending review period. Together with existing ambitious plans, including for the delivery of up to 6 million tutoring courses and 500,000 training opportunities for teachers and staff, it takes to almost £5 billion the announced overall investment that is specifically dedicated to pupils' recovery. Importantly, it will deliver an increase in funded learning hours to 40 hours for 16 to 19-year-olds—those with the least time left in education. It also includes an additional £1 billion of flexible funding directly to schools to support catch-up, so that those who know best about the education of their young people can decide how to utilise that money and support those pupils. The funding will extend the recovery premium for a further two academic years, with primary schools continuing to benefit from an additional £145 per eligible pupil, while the amount per eligible pupil in secondary schools is expected to be nearly double.

In conclusion, I am here today regardless of what is happening elsewhere in Westminster, because the people's priorities remain the same and somebody has to deliver on them in education. I cannot, in all good faith, let down the millions of people who rely on the education system day in and day out, and I will not stop working for them. By making the UK a skills superpower, we are delivering an economy that works for all and provides opportunities for all. By upgrading and uplifting our schools, we are delivering a system that values the talents of every child, regardless of where they come from. By giving families the support they need to thrive, we are delivering a country we can all be proud of. I therefore commend the departmental estimates to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, I call on the Chair of the Select Committee to finish the debate.

3.18 pm

Robert Halfon: I start by referring to the comments of the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). He might be surprised to learn that I have a lot of sympathy for what he said; we do not do enough for disadvantaged pupils, and I have tried to respond on that. He is right about further education, too, which is why I have visited my college more than 100 times since being elected as an MP. FE colleges are special places that transform people's lives, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I regard the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) as an hon. Friend, and she is right that there are too many Education Secretaries. We put great emphasis on the NHS and the economy, and I accept that we need to do that, but we need to do the same for education, and I hope the Secretary of State is in post for longer than 10 months. I welcome what the hon. Member for Twickenham said about early years and free school meals. I also welcome what the Secretary of State said in response about the holiday activities programme, and about the fact that she is open to the ideas for school breakfasts. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about childcare, and I have a lot of sympathy for what she said.

The Government are doing some good things in education. Nearly 2 million more children are in good or outstanding schools, and our literacy rates have gone

up. I appreciate what the SNP spokesperson said, and she is right that we must get more women into science, technology, engineering and maths—absolutely. I also thank the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), the Labour spokesman, for his remarks.

In conclusion, let me touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) said. The Schools and Educational Settings (Essential Infrastructure and Opening During Emergencies) Bill, which I introduced, sets out that if the Government were to try to close schools again, the Children's Commissioner would have a veto over the decision—both the current and the previous Children's Commissioner have supported the Bill—and that there should be a vote every few weeks in Parliament if schools are closed. We should never, ever, close our schools again, and I hope that the Secretary of State will look at that Bill.

Above all, we need to see action on absent children. It is unforgiveable that we are destroying these children's lives. I hope that when the Secretary of State comes back to the House, she can report that significant progress has been made. Even if we cannot get every child back, we should have most children back by September, if not before. Finally, let us have that long-term plan for education and a secure funding settlement. Now that the Secretary of State's predecessor is in the Treasury, let him put his money where his mouth is and fund education in the way that it should be funded.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Strategy for International Development

[Relevant documents: Written evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Main Estimate 2022-23, reported to the House on 17 May; Oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 18 May, on the Future of UK Aid, HC 148; Written evidence to the International Development Committee, on the Future of UK aid, reported to the House on 28 June, HC 148; Fourth Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2019-21, Effectiveness of UK aid: potential impact of FCO/DFID merger, HC 596; and the Government Response, HC 820.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £4,658,807,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022-23,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,379,354,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £5,087,990,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Vicky Ford.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the International Development Committee.

3.22 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to serve under your guidance. I also wish to thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on the spending of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the strategy for international development.

A year ago, I stood in this Chamber to open an estimates day debate on the FCDO's main estimate. At that point, the Department had recently changed the format of its spending plans, which made scrutiny incredibly difficult. I wish to take this opportunity to thank FCDO officials who have worked with House of Commons staff over the past year to restore and improve the quality of information available in the estimate, allowing my Committee and Members to fulfil their crucial role in holding the Government to account for how they spend their aid.

Much has changed since I made that speech last year, but one in 10 people around the world are still living in extreme poverty. That simply cannot be right. Today, I wish to reflect on the enormous potential that lies within the poorest communities in the world and on how the UK Government's aid spending should seek to develop that potential, transforming lives and creating a fairer, more inclusive world for all.

In the past few weeks, we have finally seen the Government release their new international development strategy. Combined with this main estimate, the approach signals a new era in how the UK spends its development funding, but I am simply not convinced that this approach will help the very poorest people in the world. It is clear that the Government's priorities are increasingly about

[Sarah Champion]

trade, security and creating British jobs, but the legally mandated objective of UK aid spending is to reduce poverty. That must remain front and centre.

The Government's plans described a more hard-nosed, investment-driven approach to UK official development assistance. Capital investment expenditure—spending that is used, for example, on infrastructure projects—has increased by 49% compared with the last financial year, but relative day-to-day spending, from which traditional aid programmes would typically be funded, has increased by only 8.5%.

Investment partnerships are becoming a more dominant feature of UK aid. British International Investment will receive a further £200 million in capital from the FCDO, and the amount of funding channelled through BII is set to increase dramatically over the next two years. Economic and investment-led development certainly has a place in any coherent development strategy, but it tends to benefit those who are engaged, or are able to engage, with the formal labour market. I am not convinced that this approach will help the poorest and most marginalised groups around the world. I am just not convinced that it will help them to achieve their potential or create long-lasting development in their communities.

Putting all of the UK's development eggs in the economic basket will mean that swathes of people are left behind: disabled people, minorities, and women and girls. How does the FCDO's approach help them to reach their potential and enrich their communities? I have no doubt that UK investments can fund and support some truly transformative projects. However, we need to get the basics right first, otherwise how will those projects succeed?

Investing in new roads does not help a girl who cannot access clean water. A new telecoms network is not much use to a boy who cannot get vital vaccines. We need basic support in place first, before those investments can succeed. Get the foundations right, and then development will flourish. Under DFID, it was clear how UK aid was working towards the attainment of the UN sustainable development goals—the map to lifting people out of poverty and keeping them out of it—but this strategy barely refers to the SDGs.

It is hard to know whether we are on the right path to development without the map that the SDGs provide. With the integration of development and wider foreign policy objectives, helping the poor increasingly seems to be seen as a by-product of British foreign policy, rather than an end in itself. In fact, this Government strategy has no qualms about UK aid being “overtly geopolitical”. The strategy seeks to actively draw lower income countries away from the influence of authoritarian regimes, and to promote freedom and democracy around the world.

However, what about the communities living in countries that are not a pressing priority for achieving a foreign policy aim, or whose Governments do not share UK objectives? Are we leaving those communities behind? What happens to their potential? In my Committee's work, we have heard that different types of development problems require different approaches. Sometimes spending through bilateral programmes is effective, and sometimes putting funds through multilaterals—such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, or the World Food Programme—is more effective. We need to use the right tools for the job.

The UK is stepping back from its commitment to multilateral co-operation and placing more emphasis on bilateral spending. The Foreign Secretary told my Committee that, in 2022-23, £3.7 billion of UK aid funding will be spent through multilaterals. By 2024-25, it will be £2.4 billion—a 35% reduction in just two years. The UK's contribution to major multilateral institutions means that we generate goodwill and we also have a huge influence over the way global institutions spend tens of billions of dollars each year.

Our multilateral investments are also a lever in investments from elsewhere, meaning that they have a multiplier effect, but the UK will be reducing its contribution to the World Bank by an astonishing 54%. If the UK is looking to increase its influence on the global stage, it seems counter-intuitive to step away from that leadership role.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee, who is making a brilliant speech. Does she agree that it is in Britain's interests to use multilateral institutions, rather than to simply donate bilaterally, because that multiplies the impact that we can have?

Sarah Champion: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. At a time of such international uncertainty, a policy of giving away influence and friendships that have taken decades, if not centuries, to build up seems a very strange way to further the interests of this country, let alone the poorest in the world.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech, and I strongly agree with her point about multilateralism. May I take her back to a debate she initiated in Westminster Hall on the plight of the Palestinians and the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency—a crucial part of the multilateral system that does so much to support Palestinians in the worst conditions in Gaza, the west bank and elsewhere in the middle east? I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that it would be good to hear from the Minister how the UNRWA pledging conference went—the Minister was good enough to reference the conference in her response to the debate last week—as well as what Britain's contribution was and why no Minister from the UK attended.

Sarah Champion: I second everything my hon. Friend has said. We have a number of significant pledges that are coming up or being processed—I am thinking, for example, of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It would be so short-sighted to step away from investments that we have been making for so long, when we are at a real crisis point on many issues, whether that is solving the problem of malaria or HIV or just maintaining what we have already built up. So I completely support what my hon. Friend has said.

The Government are blunting a key tool in the development toolbox by not continuing their support of multilaterals. Let us remember that they have chosen to cap the aid budget at 0.5% of gross national income. We face an unprecedented set of crises around the world—the war in Ukraine, hunger in the horn of Africa and the devastating impacts of climate change—so we must spend every penny of the budget in the most

effective way possible. Sadly, I am not convinced that the direction we are taking with this spending allows us to do that.

There is enormous potential in the poorest communities around the world, and UK aid can empower people to help themselves, creating long-term, sustainable economies, but we need to help lift people out of poverty first and make those transformations permanent.

3.31 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is wonderful not to be on a four-minute time limit for a debate as important as this. I draw the House's attention to my interests as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Foreign Secretary has inherited a complete mess on development, and I have great sympathy for her in trying to bring some order to things. We are, of course, still spending a very substantial sum on ODA as part of our development budget. However, that sum has reduced from 0.7% to 0.5%, and I want to say a word or two about that.

If someone was looking for the least good time to reduce this expenditure, they would definitely have chosen the date and the day upon which the Prime Minister made that decision. It was in the foothills of Britain chairing the G7 and at the time of an international global pandemic. Development leadership was really needed, and Britain was in a position to provide it. Britain was acknowledged around the world as an international development superpower and was really in a position to move the dial on these things. But what happened? The Prime Minister reduced ODA from 0.7% to 0.5%, at the very time when British leadership was really needed. Of course, the Prime Minister had also dismantled the Department for International Development, and I will come on to that in a moment, but the point I am seeking to make is that, at a time when Britain could have given real leadership—in one of the few areas where it is acknowledged, post empire, that we are a superpower and have real leadership and skills to impart—the money was reduced.

Following the pandemic, we see the scourge of famine affecting parts of our world such as the horn of Africa and all the way down the rest of the eastern side of Africa. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who is a former Secretary of State for International Development, will remember the acute leadership that DFID gave, leading other countries to stop famines and starvation in the horn of Africa. That skill has never been more needed than it is today, as we stand before a real threat to people's lives and livelihoods, but Britain is not in a position to give that leadership.

I will make two further points on the money. I do not think I will carry the Chair of the Select Committee with me here, although I pay tribute to her leadership of her Committee and the very good work that the Committee is doing, but my advice to the Foreign Secretary, given the complete mess on Britain's development policy, was to find the money from the multilateral programmes and not from the bilateral programmes. If she is forced to make that decision, a decision she should never have had to make, it is clearly right to take the money from the multilateral programmes, for the same reason that Bonnie and Clyde robbed banks: that is where the money is.

The big multilateral programmes such as the World Bank are where the money is, and the Foreign Secretary is therefore in my view right to take it from there, but that is not a decision she should have had to make.

Liam Byrne *rose*—

Mr Mitchell: The effects of taking money from the World Bank are very severe, as I suspect my friend the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) is about to make clear.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, but I disagree with him on this point. With the International Monetary Fund, for example, where we have collectively issued \$650 billion of special drawing rights, it would have been sensible for the UK to have stepped up and provided some leadership, sharing a much bigger fraction of the £19 billion we have been given. That would have encouraged the rest of the G7 to follow suit, and the G7 is about one third of the SDR issuance.

Mr Mitchell: On that point I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Although I do not want to put words into the Minister's mouth, I suspect that the Foreign Office wanted to do precisely as the right hon. Gentleman has described, but the Treasury made it extremely difficult. My point is that the savage cuts made to the bilateral programmes, where food was literally removed from the plates of starving children in Yemen, show why, in the end, if the Foreign Secretary is forced to make such decisions, she is right to take the money out of the multilateral programme.

While I am on the subject, Britain has had a leadership role within the Global Fund, along with the Americans. After 2010, we made a number of substantive changes to make the Global Fund better. It is extremely good spending, for reasons that the Minister will be well aware of, and I urge the Government to ensure that we are as generous as possible on the replenishment of the fund, not least because the Americans have made it clear that they will be even more generous than they are already being if other countries put their money where their mouth is. There is a real incentive of getting far more bang for the British taxpayer's buck in helping with the replenishment of the Global Fund.

My other point about the money, and again I hope the Chair of the Select Committee will forgive me for making it, is that I do not believe it is sensible to go in one year from 0.5% to 0.7%. The Chancellor has already committed to bringing back the 0.7% in two years' time. The year before that, he should go to 0.6%. I say that for two reasons.

There is quite a lot of money involved, and although there is no doubt we could spend it well through the multilateral system, I do not think the British taxpayer would believe that such a big uplift in one year could guarantee that the money was really well spent, and I do not want to test their patience on this. I want to make sure that we can look the British taxpayer in the eye and say that, for every pound of their hard-earned money that we spend on international development, we are delivering 100p of value on the ground. I urge Treasury Ministers to consider bringing back the 0.6% next year and the 0.7% the year after, and not doing it in one lump, which I believe is the current plan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on the book he wrote, which I remember reading about two months ago. In that book, he referred to the role he previously held in the then Department for International Development, and from what he said it was clear to me that the benefits of the money the United Kingdom spends are not just marked in financial terms, but in terms of the effect on people across the countries it helps. Does he agree that for those reasons, the good that it does is much more important than the money itself?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend—he is my hon. Friend—is absolutely right in what he says, and it is very good of him to make mention of my book, “Beyond a Fringe: Tales from a Reformed Establishment Lackey”, which is still available in bookshops. I am very grateful indeed to him for drawing the House’s attention to that. I should say that the Minister, who has a starring role in my book, understands these issues, and I absolve her of all blame for any of the criticism I am making because she inherited much of this situation and was not responsible for it.

The real problem, which is even worse than breaking our promise on the money, is the vaporisation of DFID. I think the abolition of DFID is now acknowledged in almost every corner as an absolute disaster because it has cut at a stroke the expertise assembled by Britain. The international community used to come to Britain to come to DFID, and to our universities with their programmes that were so closely entwined with DFID, to see how to drive forward the efforts in their part of the world to degrade and try to eliminate grinding international poverty. Most importantly, the top 100 people who were responsible for driving forward the Government’s agenda in DFID have gone. Of course they have, because they have been headhunted by the international system, whether in New York, Geneva or the charitable sector. They have gone because they see a Government who do not recognise or appreciate that extraordinary skill that existed in DFID. The Government are now faced with a large budget but a diminishing level of expertise.

It is even worse than that, because the Prime Minister decided that we should not revert to what Mrs Thatcher so rightly had—the Overseas Development Administration as a Department within the Foreign Office that Tony Blair subsequently took into DFID. The Prime Minister does not want an ODA in the Foreign Office because he knows that if it was there, another Administration after him could immediately re-set up, or try to re-set up, DFID, and he wants development done on a geographical basis. That is the destruction of a real hub and driver of UK leadership, influence, expertise and knowledge. All that has now gone.

All international development spending is about Britain’s national interest. It is spent largely in areas where we have a historical connection. When I was DFID Secretary, the Foreign Office always had a view, which we always accepted, about where was the best place in which British influence through development could and should be exerted. The aim of international development policy, which Britain drove forward so successfully under both political parties for so very many years, was to build safer and more prosperous communities overseas. It was to make sure that we helped countries, through partnership, to deal with conflicts—to stop conflicts starting, or, once a conflict had started, to eliminate it

and reconcile people who had been torn apart by it, and then to build prosperity and help to promote economic activity to ensure that people had the tools to lift themselves out of poverty. It was hugely in our national interest to pursue those policies because it made us safer in Britain and more prosperous as well. The world is a small place and we are all increasingly dependent on each other. That is an eternal truth.

Furthermore, building stronger and safer societies over there helps to stop the high level of migration, which is now being fuelled by starvation and famine, climate change emergencies, and the ease of travel. The whole burden of British development policy was to try to help to resolve that by building those safer and more prosperous societies overseas.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does he agree that there is a direct link between the poor people coming across on boats that this Government are now intent on rounding up and putting in detention centres, until legal challenge is stopped, to send them off to Rwanda, and the aid that we are no longer giving to the country they have come from, thus forcing them in that direction? If we want to stop people making those dangerous journeys, is not the best investment we can make to help them to do what they want to do, which is to stay where they were born and where they can be prosperous?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady has said more eloquently than me precisely why this is such an important aspect of British policy and also why it is strongly approved of by the *Daily Mail* and the right, which is because it helps achieve the aim of mitigating and addressing flows of migration and refugees. That brings me to my next point, of which again the Chair of the Select Committee may not approve. I am not opposed to sending people who have been processed here, and who are not eligible for asylum here, to Rwanda, if it is prepared to take them, which it is. I know Rwanda very well. I was there recently for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, participating in an investment conference. It is a wonderful place, and I have no objection in principle to us sending people there, once they have been processed here, if Rwandans are prepared to take them.

However, there are two problems with the current policy. One is that it will not work, and the second is that it is extraordinarily expensive. In this business, there is no alternative but to put in the work, to do the hard yards and to recognise that we have to process far more quickly and effectively people who are coming to our shores, many of whom are fleeing persecution in great jeopardy. We need to hear their cases and process them.

Secondly, we need to open up lawful, legal and safe routes. At the moment, those legal and safe routes do not exist. They exist for Ukrainians, and they did exist for Afghanis—and some time ago for Syrians—but for others they do not. Some 87% of the people who come to our shores come from just four countries, and we should remember that 75% of them end up being found eligible to stay in the country. We need these proper legal routes, we need to process in the right way and we need to restore the relationship with France.

The relationship with France, as anyone who has engaged with the French Government in any way in recent weeks and months will know, is appalling and needs to be restored. There are huge reservoirs of knowledge in this country about France and of good will with senior French politicians. Politicians on both sides of the channel know each other well, and the relationship has never been worse than it is today. It urgently needs to be restored if we are to address the issues that exist in the channel. They are issues of life and death and of order, and we cannot address them properly if we are at loggerheads with a country 22 miles away across the channel.

The final thing that we have to do if we are to resolve these issues is renegotiate the 1951 Geneva convention on refugees, which was set up largely by British effort. It was British officials who helped corral all the different parties to accept this international convention, but it was made at a time when travel was not as easy as today. The situation has completely changed. If we are to resolve this problem, which will get worse because of climate change migration, we need to understand that the rich world has to play its part if it expects the poor world to comply. That is a real job of work.

On 25 July, just under a year ago, I had this precise conversation with the Prime Minister, who described the analysis as excellent, but nothing has been done in the past year to give some extra strength and a boost to the international system to do something about it. That is my objection to the Rwanda plan. It is not that I am seduced by the relevant lobby; my objection is one of severe practicality and cost, and the plan just will not work.

Having broken our promise on the budget and having effectively abolished the Department, we are now left with a big budget being spent in ways that are determined by the Foreign Office. I remind the House that it was a law of Whitehall that while the Foreign Office did prose, the Department for International Development did money. Whenever Tony Blair and David Cameron went to an international conference where money was being discussed, they always took a senior DFID official, because DFID, as even the Treasury would admit, was extremely good at money and running money.

Frankly, the idea of these brilliant diplomats who prosecute British diplomacy so well being responsible for and running multimillion-pound development programmes should give the taxpayer the heebie-jeebies. What will happen is this: the *Daily Mail* will discover examples of Foreign Office misspending of the ODA budget, and it will rightly pick up on them. It will say, "If Britain cannot honour its pledge to the taxpayer of value for money, and if it spends money badly in this way, why do we have this budget at all? Why don't we spend all the money on our schools and hospitals here?" The argument will be made for abolishing the budget altogether, and if it is made on the back of misspending, it will be heard by our constituents.

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact is the watchdog that reports on international development—rightly, to the Select Committee and not to Ministers who can sweep inconvenient truths under the carpet. It draws its power from the legislature and is an important new part of the Government's architecture. Officials hate it because, of course, it can look at what they are doing and expose them. It is the taxpayer's friend, it reports to Parliament, and Ministers have the benefit of

its work, attention and rigour. It is a vital tool of making policy, so I urge the Minister, who understands such things, to become its strong supporter.

Sarah Champion: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for the formation of the ICAI, which absolutely does its job of scrutinising where the money goes. Does he share my concern that, at the moment, its future budget has not been signed off and it looks like its funding will be reduced, which means that its ability to scrutinise will be reduced as well?

Mr Mitchell: Of course, all the officials in the Foreign Office will want to reduce ICAI expenditure—first because they will have perfectly respectable arguments for where else the money could be spent, and secondly because they know that the way to emasculate it is to cut its expenditure. That will mean that it cannot investigate without fear and favour on behalf of the taxpayer who, as I say, is the main beneficiary. I agree with the hon. Lady and very much hope that her voice will be heard.

I will end on the subject of China, which seems to bring the whole argument together. In 2009, the Conservative Opposition decided that all development money for China would end. We did that because China has roared out of poverty; if we look at what China and India have done for poverty alleviation, we see that the results are sensationally good. China has done so much to tackle poverty and its GDP is bigger than ours, so there was clearly no case for expecting the British taxpayer to pay any money at all for development in China. I was sent by David Cameron to inform Madam Fu, the Chinese ambassador, of the decision that if we were elected and had the privilege of forming a Government, there would be no more ODA spend to China. She gave me a tremendous ticking off, but the Chinese accepted it.

When we went into government in 2010, the first thing I did when I had the privilege and honour of going into my new DFID office was to say, "No more ODA money for China. That was our commitment at the election to our constituents, and unless it's legally due now, there's to be no more ODA spend in China." Basically, since that day, DFID—when it was DFID—has not spent money in China. There were long-tail projects that it could not end, but apart from that, it did not spend any more.

Significant money continues to be spent in China, however, by the Foreign Office, and it is not really development money. Providing that money is, the Foreign Office thinks, the best way to suck up to the Chinese Government, but it is not spent sensibly. Between 2009 and 2011, in the incoming years of the Conservative Government, the expenditure was reduced from £49 million to £15 million. Between 2014 and 2019, however, that ODA expenditure—taxpayers' money—on the development budget in China rose from £23 million to £68 million. That was the highest figure, but I understand that it was £64 million in 2020. What on earth are the Government doing spending ODA money in China? We promised the electorate that we would not do it. DFID did not do it. It is not a development priority, there is no case for it and it should be stopped.

The second thing I ask of the Minister—the first was her trenchant support for the ICAI—is to commit to the House that there will be full transparency on ODA money that is spent in China. How much is it, and on

[Mr Mitchell]

what is it being spent? There is a suggestion that some of this money has been spent on prison reform in China. If that is the case, then for reasons that everyone will understand, it is an absolute disgrace. I hope the Minister will reassure us that, if that was happening, it is not happening any more and it will not happen again.

There has been further disingenuity, I would say, about spending in China, with the former Foreign Secretary announcing he was reducing it by 95%. That prompts the question of what it was doing being spent in the first place, but I suspect that figure is 95% of what the Foreign Office was spending and does not include what was being spent by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I end on this point: I am pretty sure that the money spent by BEIS has been tied aid. As the House will know, it is absolutely not allowed to spend money on tied aid—we are subject to numerous conventions we have signed not to do so—and I think it may even be against the law.

My point is that, because we no longer have the rigour and expertise of a separate Government Department that ensures this money is well spent, delivers results and gives value for money both to our partners on the ground and to the British taxpayer—we have lost that—we now have the very unrigorous and uncertain system of controls that previously led to the Pergau dam issue. We do not have the controls we had in the past, and the reputation of Foreign Office Ministers, the Foreign Office and the Government are very much at risk as a result.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Although we are not pressed for time, if everybody spoke for about half an hour we would be in some difficulty. A little guideline would be to speak for about 15 minutes, and everybody would have equal time at that rate. I appreciate that some may speak for a little less than that, but I say that just so you are aware.

3.56 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I had the great privilege of serving for nearly four years as the International Development Secretary, and I worked with many people—including the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who it is a great pleasure to follow because he was a terrific Development Secretary—who were passionate about the betterment of human kind. I was able to work with some absolutely wonderful, determined and passionate civil servants at DFID. I must be frank that it was a job that changed the way in which I think about the world, see it and seek to understand it.

We meet here today to look at the wreckage that has resulted from the Government's reversal of many things that were achieved by the creation of DFID, under Governments of both parties, and I for one am greatly saddened. I think the Prime Minister's decision to abolish DFID, to break his word and to cut the aid budget was a terrible mistake. It has had material consequences for girls' education, safe motherhood and access to contraception, as well as for children's education. The precious opportunity that going to school gives us opens a window on the world and gives us the knowledge, confidence and aspiration to make our way in our lives.

Many of DFID's programmes, which were funded by the generosity of the British taxpayer, have had to cope with the consequence of sudden cuts. To take one example, UK aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been cut by about 60%. Picking up the point just made by the right hon. Gentleman, that is a country where 27 million people are experiencing, to use the jargon, acute food insecurity. The funding cut from girls' education—how on earth did that happen?—has now been restored this year, following the Foreign Secretary's appearance before the International Development Committee, but it will only be the same in cash terms as it was in 2019, so it will in fact be a real-terms reduction.

The process of making those cuts has had a huge impact on our relationship with partner countries, multilateral institutions, non-governmental organisations and other aid organisations. It is a terrible self-inflicted wound that is not just about the money, because Britain had a reputation in the world of development. We had respect, we were listened to and we had great influence in debates about peace and security. I do not wish to appear to be dwelling on glories of the past and I recognise that times change—I will come in a moment to the challenges facing the world—but when we undermine our role as a world leader in development, it is really important that we are honest about what has been lost.

I have read the Government's new strategy for international development, which was published in May. It talks about providing a "better offer"—whatever that is—and "honest and reliable investment" as if the cuts to our development budget had happened in a completely parallel universe. Whatever else might be said about what has occurred, what Ministers have done has shown that we are not a reliable partner. So, when Samantha Power, the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development wants to pick up the phone to talk to Britain, who does she ring in the FCDO? What does that mean for our relationship with other countries? The right hon. Gentleman and I, and others in the Chamber who served in DFID, know that building consistent relationships with other people and creating trust is essential if we are to solve problems, and trust can easily be lost, as the Prime Minister is in the process of finding out.

I am afraid it is the casualness with which that happened that angers me more than anything else. I was sitting in the Chamber when the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and uttered the words that DFID was like

"some giant cashpoint in the sky."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 670.]

The right hon. Gentleman winces, and rightly so. I listened to that and thought, "This man clearly has no understanding whatsoever of what DFID is and what it has achieved." While all that has been happening, not a single other G7 country has cut its aid budget—not one—even though they face the same pressures from covid and from the international economic situation and rising prices. Indeed, France and Germany are moving further towards 0.7%. Notwithstanding the rather clever tests that the former Chancellor set on when we will return to 0.7%, I am not sure whether we will see that any time soon.

Having said all of that—and feeling slightly better for having done so—I will address the rest of my remarks to the challenges that confront the world, because that

is what we will have to address with the resources now available to the FCDO. The events of the last decade have reminded us of a very important truth. We may think that we have overcome the crises of the past, we may hope that they may never be repeated and we may believe that, because things are as they are today, they will ever be thus, but, sadly, that is not true. The global crash of 2008-09 was the worst since the crash and subsequent depression of the 1930s. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not the end of history; it was a semicolon, as the terrible war in Ukraine is currently demonstrating.

We have achieved incredible things with the gifts that the earth gives us. Look around at every single thing that human beings have built, created or made, from computers to skyscrapers and from vaccines to placing a rover on the surface of the planet Mars: every single one of them has come from things that are either on the earth or lie beneath it. That shows the extraordinary capacity of human beings to interact with what we have and to build and create. What we have done—the development that we have wrought in our own country and in others—would astonish our forebears and ancestors, but, if we thought that the process could be never-ending and that we could continue without consequence, the crisis in the natural world and the climate crisis have taught us that that is not the case, either.

I make that argument not to depress colleagues. On the contrary, I believe that we can overcome those challenges and build something better precisely because human beings have shown their ability to achieve extraordinary things, but we need the process of politics, international relationships, persuasion, encouragement, leadership, ideas, innovation and a lot of determination to be able to do that. When I look at my constituency in Leeds, I see big differences in life expectancy, health, wealth, opportunity and income between those who have and those who do not. The absolute poverty is, of course, very different to that which we are discussing in our debate today, but the challenge to overcome it is exactly the same. We face it as a country and we face it as a world.

I look also at the consequences of the threats to peace and security and how war causes millions to flee. We know that most people will seek to find somewhere safe. Although a lot of them will dream of being able to return home, sometimes that will not be possible. In our human response to those who seek shelter, wherever that happens in the world, we always need to ask ourselves one really important question. If it was us, how would we like to be treated, to be welcomed? When I read that some people who are seeking asylum in this country may have ankle tags fitted, or that some people who are seeking asylum in this country may be put on a plane to a country 5,000 miles away where they know no one and do not speak the language, I think that that, too, is a mistake.

Layla Moran: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the answer is not to detain them indefinitely in places like Campsfield House, which closed under this Government in 2018 but which they intend to reopen? That would be a retrograde step and shows that their plans are simply not working. It is the wrong approach and it should not reopen.

Hilary Benn: The right approach is to consider an asylum application and to make a swift decision. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield pointed out,

the large majority of those seeking to come to the country are found to have a perfectly valid claim for asylum.

If we do not meet the challenges of war, insecurity, economic development, climate change and damage to the natural world, then people will not stay in the place where they were born and raised. They will do what human beings have done since the dawn of time, which is to move. When the history of this century is written, I think there will be a really big chapter on global migration. Whether it is fleeing in search of food or a better life, getting away from war and persecution, or moving because it has stopped raining where they were living—I have met people who have done precisely that—people will move. All these issues are interconnected—all of them. They cannot be dealt with separately. So, when we argue that Britain should have a strong voice in the world on all these matters, we are making the argument not just because it is morally right but because it is in our self-interest.

There are those, particularly populists, who seek to pretend otherwise. These are the people who pursue narrow nationalism and seek to gain power by sowing division. All I say to them is that if they think we can shut the doors, close the curtains, get into bed, pull up the bed covers and hope that the rest of the world and the rest of the future will go away, they are profoundly mistaken. There are no fences strong enough and no walls high enough that will resist an onward tide of human beings who are on the move. I say that, because the very condition of humankind at the beginning of the 21st century is defined by our interdependence. We depend one upon another. We share a very small and very fragile planet, and we have to co-operate and work together to succeed.

I am not arguing for a separate approach to development, because from my experience I regard security, foreign policy, defence, trade and responding to humanitarian catastrophes as part of a continuum—and of course, development is not something that we bring like some benevolent former colonial power to the partner countries with which we work. Development is something that people, communities, societies and countries do for themselves, and our job is to assist them in that process. If a Government want to get all their children into school but do not have the cash to make it possible, then of course they welcome help from countries like ours to employ the teachers, build the schools, buy the textbooks and put in the desks. We know from our experience—this is another truth—that, in 1,000 years of history, we have made just about every mistake that is possible. I sometimes felt slightly embarrassed about talking to Ministers from developing countries, because I was conscious of that history, and I would say, “I don’t want it to take you as long as it took us to progress from where we were to where we are today”.

We have learned that we can make progress through a process of political, social and economic development, which has transformed the lives of our citizens. We know what the essential building blocks are: peace; good health; the right to go to school; the rule of law; intolerance of corruption; trade; economic opportunity and justice; and sustainability when it comes to the natural world and the climate. All those can help to enable people to improve their lives.

[Hilary Benn]

In a world where there is so much change and uncertainty, where what we rely on today may not be relied on tomorrow, it is really important that Britain is seen as a reliable, trusted, consistent and honest partner. I am afraid that the events of the past two years, which are reflected in the estimates before the House, have done that aim great harm. That is why I look forward to the day when that harm is undone.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House for interrupting the debate, but you will be aware that there has been a significant number of resignations from the Government Front-Bench team today. I think it was 31 at the last count—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friends say 32—I have not checked my phone since I rose to my feet. There is a serious point: as well as a duty to Departments and the functions of government, Ministers have a duty to the House. My understanding—I wonder whether this is your understanding, Madam Deputy Speaker—is that the Government have adjourned or effectively cancelled Bill Committees tomorrow, because they are unable to provide Ministers to fulfil their duties to the House. Can you give us an indication of whether the Leader of the House has said that he intends to come here to make a statement about any change of business and about the Government's ability to fulfil their obligations to the House? It seems very much to me that this Government have ceased in their ability to govern.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I have received no notification from the Leader of the House that he intends to make any sort of statement, and I have not been led to believe that the Speaker's Office has either. The Committee of Selection meets this afternoon to look at membership of Committees. If Committees are not going ahead, they would simply not appear on the Order Paper tomorrow. However, if the hon. Gentleman requires any further information, I direct him to the Public Bill Office, which may be able to give that to him. As I said, however, I have not received any notification from the Leader of the House with regard to this matter, but those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

4.13 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who is always an entertaining and informative speaker. When I first came to this place in 2010, I was elected to the International Development Committee, which I have served on ever since. I believe that the Committee has done very good work over those years and I am sure that it will continue to do that good work, as it still exists, about which there was some doubt when DFID was taken over by the Foreign Office. It is really important that the International Development Committee exists, because Members who sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee have little interest in the money that is spent on the poorest of the poor. The scrutiny of the International Development Committee is needed to ensure that the money is being spent as well as it possibly can be. I am horrified by what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)

said about the money that is still being spent in China. There seems to be no sense in that, so I hope that the Minister will address the point in her closing remarks.

I am a bit disappointed, because this is an important debate but there are few Members in the Chamber. That is quite surprising, because there are now quite a lot of Back Benchers; one would think that a few more might come and join us. However, I am very pleased to speak in the debate and glad that we have a whole debate to focus specifically on the FCDO's international aid work. It was of significant concern to me and others, including the Chair of our Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), when the two Departments "merged"—that was what it was called, but actually I think it was a takeover. We were told that there would not be sufficient focus on the international development angle, so the scrutiny of this House is very welcome.

It would be impossible to discuss the departmental estimates for international development without mentioning our 0.7% spending target, a subject that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield covered extensively. The target was long campaigned for by many hon. Members, including me, and I am deeply disappointed that it has been reduced to 0.5% by the Government. I understand why, but we are talking about the poorest of the poor, who need our help. Obviously, the economy has been hit by the pandemic, but as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, the same pandemic has caused terrible strife all around the world, not just here in the United Kingdom. As a result of the cut, some of the people who most need our assistance will no longer receive it. The sustainable development goals, which we have signed up to, say that we should be helping the poorest of the poor—and there are so many people in the world who are incredibly poor.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned that the Chancellor had said that we would go back to 0.7% in two years. My right hon. Friend himself believes that we should make it 0.6% next year and 0.7% the year after. There is logic in that, but I think that he was referring to the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). We do not know what the current Chancellor wants, so our Committee needs to press him by inviting the Foreign Secretary before us and asking her what will happen. It is important that we, and the people we are trying to help, know what we will be doing.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech about very important matters. As she says, there are a significant number of very poor people in the world and we have a duty to support them. Will she address the issue of the Government mis-badging some forms of spending, for example by counting defence spending or other departmental spending towards the aid target? That seems to me to be a mistake and to be unfair on the very poorest people in the world.

Mrs Latham: That is a very important point that our Select Committee absolutely needs to scrutinise, because it would be illegal to badge that spending wrongly. We have a duty to ensure that our taxpayers know that our spending is transparent and in the right place. It is really important that we do not mis-badge it, because otherwise we will lose the trust of a lot of countries around the world.

As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, we know that there will be more and more migration because of climate change. People are not going to stay in a country that is drought-ridden. They cannot feed their cattle. They cannot be the nomads they were before, going off to find fresh pastures and then coming back in a circle, as the nomadic tribes in Kenya used to do. People cannot do that if they have no food for their cattle. For that important reason we need to tackle climate change, but I fear that the reduction to 0.5% means we will have less opportunity to do so, and that means there will be more migration. Indeed, I believe there will be more and more migration, not just for drought and climate change reasons but for reasons of conflict. So many people are fleeing their countries, either because of civil war or because of attempts to annihilate certain populations. They have to escape, because that is the general public's normal response to terrifying situations.

However, I do not intend to focus on the overall aid budget in my short speech. Instead, I want to comment briefly on the important issue of neglected tropical diseases, including malaria. They are called neglected tropical diseases because people forget about them. A couple of weeks ago, I, too, was in Rwanda for the Kigali summit, which aimed to tackle the problems of malaria and neglected tropical diseases, and which was a very successful event. Governments, the private sector and philanthropists all pledged to help to accelerate the global fight to beat these deadly diseases, with commitments made at the summit totalling more than \$4 billion.

However, there is much more to be done. In 2020 alone, an estimated 627,000 people died of malaria—a staggering number. More than 1.7 billion people required treatment and care for neglected tropical diseases over the course of that year. Often, the impact of covid-19 was to disrupt community care and preventive programmes, meaning that the number of people receiving treatment for NTDs fell by 33% in 2020. There is a simple and cheap cure for many of these diseases, and we must not lose sight of that.

While I was in Rwanda, I attended a programme run by the UK-funded National Institute for Health and Care Research about podoconiosis, a neglected tropical disease that causes dreadful pain and suffering, generally among farmers and those who spend a lot of time in contact with irritant soils without wearing shoes. The microbe gets into their bodies and causes them terrible problems. NTDs such as podoconiosis are widespread in huge parts of the world, and funds for research and prevention are needed not only from a humanitarian and ethical perspective, but from an economic one. For those people's communities and families, these diseases can lead to long-term poverty, hunger and starvation because they can prevent people from working. For example, podoconiosis patients lose 45% of their productive working days to the disease. Research on treatment and prevention can keep people economically active, and able to maintain their lifestyles and their jobs.

Investment in tackling NTDs—that is just one small example—and malaria has huge positive knock-on effects throughout the local economy. The UK funding is providing real benefit for podoconiosis patients through research into treatment options, genetic research, education and more, enabling sufferers to live healthier, happier and more productive lives. I urge the Minister to consider people who suffer from the disease, because it is horrendous.

The UK has a strong legacy of investment in the elimination and control of NTDs—it is supporting the Rwandan Government's ambition to eliminate podoconiosis by 2024—and it is critical that we maintain that legacy. This is an example of the UK helping the world's poorest to live happy, healthy, economically active lives. That helps the economy and the education of women and girls, giving them the good future that many do not have at the moment. That programme in Rwanda has been funded, but others have been hit by the international development funding cuts. For example, the Ascend programme countries still need support to reach their elimination goals.

I encourage the Minister to consider the forthcoming year's spending and to invest as much as we can in NTDs, and in particular in preventing malaria. That is doable; we can eliminate malaria, and it is so important that we contribute significantly to that. The shift in spending under the international development strategy away from multilateral programmes and towards bilateral funding threatens many of the programmes that aim to combat NTDs and malaria. I would therefore be delighted if the Minister could today confirm an ambitious commitment to the forthcoming seventh replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

4.25 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Let me declare my interest, at the outset of this debate, as the chair of the international parliamentary network on the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), on bringing this debate to the House. Her timing, as ever, is impeccable. All of us here in this Chamber are watching the disintegration of the Government in real time, so in a way this debate is important because it is taking place at a hyphen moment between an Administration that are biting the dust and the construction of the new Administration that will no doubt take shape over the days and weeks to come. Like everyone who has spoken in this debate, I very much hope that the new Administration will look hard at the arguments we have made today and seek to reverse the appalling policy, the appalling cut and the appalling breach of trust represented by the slash in our aid budget.

I want to supply three thoughts for today's debate. The first is that at the heart of it is the simple truth that when the world needed us to step up, we stepped back. We stepped away from our obligations, we stepped away from our duties and we stepped away from our promises. Those promises were enshrined when we signed up to SDG2 and made a commitment to end hunger. Not only has breaking our promise to help to supply the finance for that destroyed trust in our country around the world, but people will die this year as a result of that broken promise.

Many people here today have said that that decision could not have come at a worse time. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) was among those who made that point, and he is absolutely right. We now have a crisis of food, fragility and finance that means that 200 million people around the world are facing a food emergency. We know that 60% of workers are still not earning what they did before the covid

[Liam Byrne]

crisis, but we now have millions of people living almost in famine conditions and 200 million people who will face famine later this year unless things change. Things will change over the course of this year, but they will change for the worse.

Just a week or two ago, I was with the Foreign Affairs Committee in New York and we were privileged to see the NATO Secretary-General. He is fighting tooth and nail for the deal to try to get tens of millions of tonnes of grain out of Ukraine and Russia and, crucially, tens of millions of tonnes of fertiliser out of Russia. If we fail in that task, the spike in food prices that we have seen over the last year will get worse. Even more seriously, if we do not get the fertiliser out in the next few months, we will jeopardise not just the wheat harvest for next year but the rice harvest for next year. We will begin to see up to 1 billion people face a food crisis if we do not make progress on that deal. People were already in a bad position because of covid, and they are in a bad position because of inflation, but it has now deteriorated substantially because of the crisis in Ukraine.

Governments around the world are out of headroom on taking the fiscal measures needed to alleviate this coming crisis. More and more developing countries now denominate their debt in dollars rather than domestic currency, which means they are super-exposed to rising interest rates in the United States. Average interest rates on lower-income debt are up by about 77 basis points this year, and we now know that something like 12 countries around the world are already on the brink of debt distress. We already see unrest in some countries in Africa, and we see the consequences of the debt crisis in Sri Lanka. Things will become far worse this year unless we get our act together.

Of course, the problem is most acute in countries that are fragile and where there is violence. Frankly, countries and agencies such as Russia and the Wagner Group are already perpetrating barbaric human rights abuses in Mali, Libya, Syria and another 18 countries around the world. This crisis of food fragility and finance will not sort itself out, which is precisely why this is such an appalling time for the Government to make their aid cut.

My second point is a particular interest of mine, which is that the Government's negligence is all the worse because they are not using the new tools they have been given. Last year, under Kristalina Georgieva's leadership of the International Monetary Fund, the global community took the collective decision to mint \$650 billion-worth of special drawing rights. Overwhelmingly because of the quota system, those special drawing rights go to richer countries like us. In fact, the special drawing rights coming to G7 countries total about \$196 billion, which is about a third of the special drawing rights that have been issued.

Where are those special drawing rights? Where is the deployment of that resource to tackle this crisis of food fragility and finance? Right now, those SDRs are gathering dust in the vaults of central banks and treasuries around the world. They are just sitting there. We have failed to mobilise that resource in the way we promised when we signed off on the commitment to issue the special drawing rights in the first place.

The UK is a big shareholder that helped to found the International Monetary Fund, so we have been given £19 billion of special drawing rights. We have made commitments to share back about 20%. Why is 20% the magic number? We have just been given £19 billion. This is a slightly technical issue, but our SDRs go into something called the exchange equalisation account, which was set up in 1979 and underpins currency stability in this country. It has been restocked with £74 billion over the last 10 years to a level that the Treasury deems to be capital adequate, about £154 billion or \$185 billion in total.

We have restocked the exchange equalisation account and then, from left field, comes another £19 billion that we did not forecast and that we do not need because we have already restocked the account. Why have we suddenly decided to share just 20% of it? There is no logic for that percentage.

The Government have so much grip on this topic that, when I asked the Foreign Secretary at last week's Foreign Affairs Committee how much had actually come in through the special drawing rights, she did not know. She literally did not know that Her Majesty's Government had just been handed £19 billion, which is twice the aid budget. I then prosecuted the argument and asked, "What is your target for sharing? How much are we supposed to share back?" She answered, "I don't know." I asked the Prime Minister the same question this week, and he did not know either. They could perhaps be forgiven if the numbers were not so big and if the crisis were not so serious, but this is absolutely crazy. We have a global crisis and the Government are simply not in control. They do not have a grip on sharing back and rechanneling some of the biggest assets and resources available to us.

The point about multilateralism, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) mentioned, is fundamental. Last week's G7 communiqué made a very clear statement that G7 leaders want to step up the mobilisation of \$100 billion, but the truth is that, of the G7 countries, we have made a commitment, Japan has made a commitment and the French have made a commitment. Congress has blocked the President of the United States sharing \$21 billion, and we do not yet have information from the IMF on the others—I checked yesterday. So we are miles away from mobilising the \$100 billion that was promised at the G7, and people are going to starve this year unless we get a grip. So my call on the Government today is to give us a good explanation for why we should not be sharing three quarters of the special drawing rights we have been given; why we are not leading a global effort to get to that \$100 billion target; and why we are not insisting on more flexibility, such as giving the SDRs to multilateral development banks, such as the African Development Bank, which could be making such an impact on the ground. We need to be saying to the IMF that countries do not need to participate in a conditionality programme with the IMF in order to receive some of this money. I discussed that with the Secretary-General of the UN and we both agree on it. We are not going to lead the mobilisation of this effort if the politicians in charge at the helm are, frankly, in such a shambolic state. So my message to the Minister and the new Administration is: please get a grip of this enormous new resource that we have been given.

My final point is, in part, inspired by what my neighbour the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said about China. For some years now, we have been having a debate in this country and among our allies about the influence of China and this vexed, significant issue of debt diplomacy. If we look at the countries that did not support the UN resolution on Russia, we see that, on average, they owe five times more debt to China than the countries that supported the resolution. As for whether that is a coincidence, you be the judge. The point is that the debt in many of these countries is about to fall over and the G20 common framework process, which we have held up as the great saviour of debt sustainability, has been so successful that precisely zero countries have engaged in it. So it ain't working and we need a different approach. We could be restructuring developing country debt using IMF and World Bank resources. The World Bank has just committed \$170 billion to an emergency programme that we could be using to restructure the debt of vulnerable countries around the world—right now we are simply not doing that. If we do not want to live in a world where China is the lender of last resort to countries around the world, let us use the Bretton Woods institutions that we set up in 1944 to avoid that dilemma.

In the midst of a big war, in 1941, the Atlantic charter was signed, and its story is extraordinary. Our Prime Minister at the time, Mr Churchill, was on the other side of the Atlantic with President Roosevelt and the draft of the charter was sent to Downing Street. Clement Attlee was in the Chair and he convened the Cabinet at two o'clock in the morning in order to review the draft and make one vital change. He added article 5, which said that one of our war aims would be that the victors would

“desire to bring about the fullest collaboration between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement, and social security”.

Three years later, at Bretton Woods, President Roosevelt, welcomed delegates from 44 countries from around the world with these words:

“the economic health of every country is a proper matter of concern to all its neighbors, near and distant.”

As we begin to think about what the new world looks like, those are wise words to guide us.

4.38 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the Chair of the International Development Committee, on securing this important debate. It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). He discussed a lot of wise history and important points, and I hope we will hear an answer on them when the Minister gets to the Dispatch Box. I wish to commend her and say how incredibly energetically she works on this agenda. I salute her indefatigability and the results she has delivered. In addition, let me point out that I, too, am one of those who regrets that we reduced our promise from 0.7% to 0.5%; I was one of the 26 rebels who voted against that. However, I am going to try in this speech not to dwell on the past, particularly since my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) covered that matter so well.

I want instead to talk more positively about the strategy the Foreign Secretary has set out. I welcome the fact that it continues to include an emphasis on girls' education and educating every child with 12 years of quality education. That is incredibly powerful in terms of international development, and I want to dwell in particular on soft power. We must raise our game on soft power from its already high level because we are at a pivotal time in history. On 24 February, when Putin began the evil invasion of Ukraine, we shifted into a new and historic era with the forces of evil and authoritarianism on the advance against the forces of liberal democracy, which we have for too long taken for granted. We now realise that we have to stand up for our freedoms; freedoms are not free, and we need to think about how we can best make the case for those freedoms.

I have the privilege of chairing the British group in the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In that role I was leading the delegation to the assembly in Indonesia in March and we wanted to put out a strong statement condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We might think that that would be relatively uncontroversial, particularly since the UN had carried the motion so strongly, but in fact it is proving to be quite a battle: it is a battle for ideas and for soft power.

Soft power is an area where the UK has great assets and strengths, and we must increase our emphasis on that and the energy we put into those strengths. The BBC is one of those soft power assets and we spend a lot of our official development assistance budget on making sure we communicate in languages like Yoruba and Tigrinya that are widely heard around the world. That plays an important part in getting accurate information to countries that are being fed disinformation from Russia, particularly disinformation about the battlefield that that we have heard about today: energy, the price of energy and the price of food. Given the stresses that that is putting on our economy, we can imagine how much stress it is putting on some of the very poorest countries in the world. As we heard last week when Ukrainian MPs visited us here in Parliament, that is being weaponised by Russia to attack Ukraine. In some of the poorest countries the message is going around that their energy and food prices have gone up so much because of the Ukrainians. We must up our game in counteracting that messaging by having a strong communications strategy and making sure we are using the incredible soft power we have through the BBC.

The British Council is another soft power asset. Next week I am leading a delegation to Kosovo, a country which, because it is in the Balkans, is on the soft power frontline. I learned to my dismay yesterday that the British Council is thinking of closing its office in Pristina and moving the delivery of its important courses to Belgrade in Serbia. I urge the Minister to ask her officials to look into that for her because we must ensure that our valuable soft power tools such as the British Council and the BBC—in so many foreign languages—are able to counteract some of the terrible messaging we are hearing in what is now a war between the good of liberal democracy and the evil of authoritarianism.

On this point about the soft power battle, may I particularly highlight for praise the decision that the Foreign Secretary took to rename the Commonwealth Development Corporation, one of Britain's greatest hidden soft power assets, as British International Investment?

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

I say three cheers for that decision. British International Investment does what it says on the tin. It is a much better name than the CDC, which, frankly, even sounds Chinese. British International Investment has that UK branding, and I urge the Minister to look further at branding everything that we do through this budget as coming from the UK. The former Secretary of State stamped a Union Jack on our food aid with the words, “Gift of the British people” in countries where, perhaps, the level of literacy in English is not particularly high. I like the way that the Australians stamp a kangaroo on all of their food aid. Can we do more to show that this aid is coming from us? We are in an information versus disinformation battleground at the moment. As others have said so eloquently, we are going into a period where food insecurity—famine—is on the march again, particularly across the Horn of Africa.

The UK can also play an important role in using our hard power to get the grain out of Odesa. But let us make sure that, when that grain arrives and when we are able to give food aid, it is clear that this is coming from the western nations.

May I digress slightly to ask the Minister to update me on where we have got with clean cookstoves? Many women in poor countries spend much of the day going out to cut down trees to make it into charcoal only to go home and poison themselves and their family cooking with this very carbon-intensive fuel. I know that the UK is leading the world in research into clean cookstoves.

I shall conclude my brief remarks by highlighting some of the excellent things that British International Investment has been doing to lift countries out of poverty through long-term private sector development. No country has ever left a dependency without a thriving private sector. Companies that have been invested in by British International Investment employ nearly 1 million people in around 64 of the world’s poorest countries. That is the kind of practical and sensible intervention that really makes a difference. I am so glad that it is now labelled, “from the British Government”.

I am so pleased that £479 million of investment has gone into climate finance. There is so much more that can be done on this. Countries with very little electricity distribution can benefit from clean energy and clean energy investment, which will make so much more sense economically than other sources of energy.

Let me reiterate the key point of my speech: from here, how do we make the best of what we have, and how do we make the best of our international strategy to maximise the UK’s soft power assets? Let us keep doing the good things that we are doing, and let us move towards 0.7% as quickly and as judiciously as we can. In the meantime, three cheers for the rebranding of the CDC.

4.49 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), and I will come on to her point about soft power in a moment. I join others in congratulating the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), on securing the debate. I also join them in stressing just

how wrong-headed the abolition of the Department for International Development was, as was the decision to cut development funding to just 0.5% of our national income, which was an act of self-harm just as much as it was an act of harm to the developing world.

Beyond our moral responsibility, as one of the richest nations in the world, to help the very poorest in the world, there is surely also a strong national, domestic set of reasons for rethinking our approach to international development, which covid and refugees risking their lives to cross the channel have helped to underscore. I entirely understand the argument that our constituents’ needs must always come first, particularly in the middle of a cost of living crisis, but whether or not to give aid to countries overseas is not a binary choice. I would also gently say in passing that the choice would be even easier if the Treasury had not wasted billions of pounds on covid loans that should never have been given.

As the hon. Member for West Worcestershire said, it is in Britain’s national interests to build up our soft power, just as it is important to have real military power to call on in the very worst of times. Soft power comes from our global trade and business links; from the work of our universities; from our cultural institutions, such as the BBC, other parts of the media and the British Council; from the quality of the work our diplomats do in the Foreign Office; and, crucially, from the quality of the development support and leadership we provide.

If aid is used well in other countries, that helps our country too. For example, better police forces in other countries help to limit the potential impact of overseas criminality here. Better health services in developing countries help to prevent the spread of disease—think Ebola—to UK shores. Better opportunities for higher standards of living in developing countries help to reduce people’s reasons for taking perilous trips to start new lives in countries such as ours. And better governance, as well as efforts to support peace and build stable countries, helps to prevent conflicts and reduce the numbers of refugees needing to travel to more stable countries.

Then there are the even more intangible benefits of development assistance and other examples of soft power. If we are seen to help the world’s poorest for the best of reasons in countries that are not as rich as ours, doors open for other parts of our Government and for players in the business world, on whom our economic success depends. So there is a strong moral case for aid, but the self-interested case for aid is also powerful.

I gently say to Ministers that it is a mistake to have axed the Department for International Development. By the time I joined the Department as a Minister in 2003, it was already world leading. It was held in considerable regard across the developing world and on the world’s great stages at the United Nations and the G8. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said much more eloquently than I can, the talent of the Department’s officials was stunning and striking. I digress briefly to acknowledge the passing recently of one excellent official I worked with, Danny Graymore, who did some remarkable work on access to medicines. He was rightly recognised for his service to our country and to development.

The calibre of the Department’s Secretaries of State was beyond question. We had the remarkable Clare Short, the excellent noble Lady Valerie Amos, my right hon.

Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Douglas Alexander. The Department had clear and obvious support from Prime Ministers and Chancellors of the Exchequer, certainly from 1997 to 2010 and, to be fair, in the first years of the Conservative party's time in government. I say in passing that I hope I managed not to do too much damage to the Department's reputation while I was there.

Between 1997 and 2010, Britain helped to lift almost 50 million people out of poverty and initiated a huge programme of debt relief. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) made a powerful point about the need for a new programme of debt relief; if only there was someone in this Government with the imagination to lead such an effort.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Several whistleblowers have revealed that there was chaos and a failure of leadership at the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office when the merger between the Foreign Office and DFID took place, and particularly during the fall of Kabul in Afghanistan. The leadership was distracted by the merger, senior DFID staff were unable to access FCDO systems, and that meant that support on the ground for our staff members was poor. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government prioritise a political response rather than humanitarian support for people on the ground?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and it will be good to hear the Minister's response to that. I will certainly make some brief remarks about Afghanistan and the plight of the people there.

I was just mentioning the difference that the Department for International Development made and could potentially make again. We helped to get 40 million more children into school in the 13 years the Department was run by the Labour party. Polio was on the verge of being eradicated thanks to the vaccination programmes we funded across the world, particularly in countries such as India and Pakistan. Having initiated the strategy, I am particularly proud that more than 3 million more people were able to access life-preserving HIV and AIDS drugs in countries such as Malawi and Zambia, as you will remember only too well, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We improved water and sanitation services for more than 1.5 million people. We invested in better maternity and family planning services in countries such as Nepal. When earthquakes and other disasters struck, we led the way in improving the humanitarian conditions of those hit—in Sri Lanka after the tsunami, for example, or in Pakistan after the earthquake in Kashmir.

Other major countries, including the US, Germany, France, Japan and Norway, have separate Departments providing aid on the one hand and doing the hard yards on diplomacy on the other. The skillsets required of our diplomats and our development experts are very different. Development experts are focused on ensuring our aid goes where it needs to go to make a real difference, while our diplomats are rightly push a range of UK Government priorities to their counterparts.

The relentless focus the Department for International Development placed on its poverty reduction mission put it centre stage. The fact that that aid did not appear

conditional on backing Britain all the time made our presence and our money even more welcome and, as a result, made the access and influence of our diplomats that little bit greater. It is striking that Ministers have offered little rigorous rationale for the merger. Frankly, the sooner both that and the cut in aid are reversed, the better.

I want to challenge the Minister gently on why governance is no longer part of the priorities for our aid spending. I think of the funding we provided before 2010 to help developing countries invest in better statistics collection services. That may not sound particularly important in the context of huge hunger or education needs, but without the ability to collect statistics about what is happening on the ground in a country we cannot make good decisions about the allocation of resources, work out where to send the next tranche of money to make a real difference or hold politicians and Governments to account. We need governance efforts in these countries that help to target corruption by funding the equivalent of the National Audit Office or the Public Accounts Committee; to support independent media to hold politicians to account; to bring to light the examples of corruption and to get rid of people from politics who are serving their own interests rather than the interests of the people; and to help to train high-quality civil servants so that instead of relying on NGOs or overseas aid, they can run things in their country for themselves. At my most naive, I want a world where aid and NGOs are not needed, but for that ambition to come just a little bit closer, we need to help countries to build effective Parliaments and effective Governments with great civil servants so that they can provide services to every community in every corner of their country. We should seek to back good governance and prioritise that as part of our aid strategy going forward.

Other speakers have mentioned the cuts in funding to the global multilateral system. I echo the comments about support for the global fund. I hope the Minister will be able to give Members in all parts of the House an assurance that that will be appropriately backed at the coming pledging conference. We are seeing cuts in funding to the global multilateral system at a time when there is so much need, and when we need honest brokers in the UN system to co-ordinate humanitarian relief and tackle the provision of support for hunger and poverty. That has never been more needed than now. It is a hugely retrograde step to cut by so much the funding to the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and so on. Indeed, when Ministers made those decisions, they went against their own review of multilaterals, which found that funding through multilaterals delivers more bang for our collective buck and reduces administrative costs to the taxpayer.

I want to make some specific points about countries that are of interest to my constituents. We have cut our bilateral funding to Pakistan by some 57% from about £463 million in 2016 to about £200 million a couple of years ago. Even two and a half years ago, Pakistan had the second highest numbers of refugees in the world, placing huge pressure on the country and the systems in place there. Given what happened in Afghanistan just 10 months ago, the pressures on Pakistan are even greater, with powerful challenges in terms of food insecurity, getting good-quality education, economic empowerment,

[Gareth Thomas]

and good family planning and other health services. It would be good to hear a clear rationale from the Minister for such a huge cut in funding.

Nepal and Sri Lanka are also, for different reasons, facing huge challenges in making progress towards the SDGs. Due to climate change, too many people in Nepal have had to leave the country for much of the year to go to India or other countries to seek work. It is therefore crucial to do as much as we can to help economic empowerment in Nepal. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) briefly alluded to Sri Lanka, with which a huge number of my constituents have very close connections. If ever there was a country that has made the case for a greater programme of debt relief—I echo his point, too, about China as the lender of last resort—it is Sri Lanka. There are huge human rights and governance concerns in Sri Lanka, as my Tamil and Muslim constituents know only too well, but it is striking that all the peoples of Sri Lanka are suffering hunger, loss of jobs, and real wage insecurity. I wonder whether, in the short term, the Department needs to be doing more to help the people of Sri Lanka.

Lastly, on Africa, the move away from aid being used for poverty reduction is perhaps the most striking thing in the tilt towards the Indo-Pacific. In my Front-Bench role, I have been struck by how a series of businesses have argued that Africa is where Asia was 10 to 15 years ago. Some countries have very fast developing economies, and some countries are making huge efforts on the quality of their governance. It therefore surely makes even less sense to be withdrawing aid and withdrawing our influence in Africa when our business community is beginning to look with such interest at its prospects in Africa. I am not advocating for tied aid—absolutely not—but the more we resume strong soft power and strong influence in Africa, the more down the line we can help our businesses win contracts in Africa and help to create jobs, too.

I end by urging the next Government to rethink their approach to the abolition of the Department for International Development. It needs re-establishing quickly, and we need to move quickly back to 0.7% of our national income being spent on aid.

5.6 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this incredibly important debate. Notwithstanding whatever state the Government may be in now—the latest apparently being that they cannot find MPs to fill the roles of all the Ministers who have resigned—this incredibly important debate shows that Parliament continues to work, even if the Government do not.

Last week, we debated the Government's thoroughly un-British plan to go back on their word and break their promise over the Northern Ireland protocol. Today we must remind ourselves that this is another promise, made right at the beginning of the Prime Minister's premiership, that has been broken. I found the remarks of the Prime Minister interesting when he said, clearly in relation to the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), that some people do not change.

I am afraid that is what we have seen in this Prime Minister as well, because he has not, and the decisions that this Government have made are wrecking our reputation, not just domestically, but internationally, too, whether that is the diplomatic service, the BBC World Service, the British Council, or, as has rightly been the focus of the debate today, the international development budget.

The Liberal Democrats are particularly proud that we brought forward the Bill that enshrined 0.7% in law, but it was a cross-party, settled matter among MPs across the whole House. It was in all our manifestos, and we collectively promised it. That promise to the British people was broken by this Government when they reneged on 0.7%, and shame on them. Perhaps the good that will come from the eventual, inevitable fall of this Prime Minister is that decency and honesty might be restored to this Government. I hope therefore that the first act of the new incoming Administration might be to restore the aid budget immediately.

Today I want to focus on this Government's current mishandling of the aid budget. The cut to the budget has hit and continues to hit those countries who need it most, including Ethiopia. The House may not know, but I lived in Ethiopia. We moved there when I was five, and we were there until I was eight. It was in the early '80s, and people may remember the famine. We were there because my father had been given the job of economic adviser to the European mission out there, and my earliest memories of life at all are going with him to aid projects, where I would meet little children of my age who were emaciated, did not have clean water and were not able to go to school. It is a success story of aid that many of those children down the line, and their children, would have had better prospects than perhaps the young children I met.

In the context of the war in Ethiopia, the aid budget has been slashed from £325 million in 2020-21 to £30 million in 2024-25—less than a tenth. In Bangladesh, the budget will have halved from £200 million in 2020-21 to just £100 million in 2024-25. Those cuts are not a proud record of global leadership in international development; they are an international disgrace that is affecting the most vulnerable now more than ever.

Since the Government reneged on their promise, we have found ourselves with a war in Ukraine, which means that the 400 million people worldwide who rely on Ukrainian food supplies cannot get them. That ongoing military crisis—the blockade of ports, the destruction of agricultural machinery and the shells strewn across fields—is preventing grain from leaving what is rightly named the breadbasket of the world. That crisis will lead to people dying and to further instability.

I also lived in Egypt for a while; we moved there right after the revolution. The reason that the Arab spring happened was the price of tomatoes and bread. That kind of poverty and economic instability lead to political instability. To the points that have been made on both sides of the House I would say that if we are intent on helping people so that they do not have to flee and come to our shores as refugees, the best investment that we can make is to give money to partners abroad that can help them to have the best possible life where they want to be—in their cultures, in their homes, in those countries. Of course we want 0.7% to be restored, and the Ukraine

crisis is why it should be restored now. In the light of that crisis, we need to step up to the plate—to the global catastrophe in front of us.

There may be hope. The latest Office for Budget Responsibility forecast reveals that a return of 0.7% is on the cards, because the fiscal tests of the old Chancellor are due to be met in 2023-24—less than a year away. Now that that decision has been made, however, it does not give me hope that the Treasury will acknowledge that 0.7% will return, because every time it has been pressed, it has refused to say whether it will allow it in the autumn. By its own tests, it should be in this autumn's Budget that we return to 0.7%, but as has been mentioned, that promise was made by the last Chancellor. As of today, we have a new Chancellor; perhaps he will do the right thing and restore 0.7%.

International development was a proud thing for this country to hang its hat on, which matched our proud reputation as a development superpower. If the Government were serious about global Britain—Great Britain—they would lean into that reputation. It had its own Department and Secretary of State with a dedicated seat at the Cabinet table and at the National Security Council. The United Kingdom is a centre for excellence for international development and we are home to institutions that deliver world-leading research and development technical expertise and project co-ordination.

Yet the international development strategy makes it clear how far we have already fallen. After reading it, it was interesting and instructive to do a little word search. If the point of international aid is to alleviate poverty—the Government's stated aim—why was it mentioned only nine times? Investment, however, particularly linked to trade, was mentioned 48 times. That tells us everything that we need to know about the Government's priorities.

When the Government announced their plan to merge the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Members on both sides of the House joined forces with the sector to raise concerns about what that would mean for effectiveness. I am sorry to say that that fear has come true.

The strategy prioritises bilateral aid over multilateral aid. This is fundamentally counter to the liberal ideal of working within international structures to solve the world's problems. It should be “and”, not “or”—not multilateral or bilateral, but both. Multilaterals, including the United Nations, are very often the first to be able to get there on the ground with dedicated teams. In times of urgent humanitarian crises, it is very often specialist teams from such multilateral organisations that can deliver the big asks needed for rebuilding, so I am deeply concerned about how this policy will impact on the UK's ability to respond to emerging disasters, in particular.

If we are serious about tackling poverty, inequality and vulnerability across the world, it is also essential that trade is distributed where it is most needed—not where it is most likely to benefit us; that is wrong. Trade is an important part of why we do aid, but it should never be the whole reason. Trade is important, of course, and so is aid, but tying one to the other, as is the direction of travel, is the wrong approach. I remain highly concerned by this Government's approach, which may be leading us down a dark path towards tied aid. If people want a story about what that looked like, they

should look at the corruption surrounding the Pergau dam. If we say, “Well, we legislated against that”, look what the Government are doing with their own legislation: they just throw it out the window when they think it is the right time.

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree with what the hon. Lady says. I am very conscious that in many of the countries my constituents have relationships with—Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Malawi, to give just three examples—there are NGOs and church groups on the ground, and they understand where the real needs are. Sometimes, it is better to feed in to the knowledge of the people on the ground about where the real needs are to ensure that aid gets through. Would that be an example of what the Government should be trying to do?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Member very much for his intervention. I have seen this in the Ukraine crisis with a charity I know that operates in Moldova. The smaller charities are often very nimble and can use their knowledge straightaway on the ground. However, this needs to be “and”, not “or”. They cannot do it all; they have to do it in partnership with the multilaterals. Taking from one and not feeding into the other is the wrong approach.

In my view, the international development strategy emphasises short-term quick wins and overlooks the deeper causes of poverty and vulnerability. I will pick one specific example about women and girls, who are purportedly a priority in this strategy. The strategy claims that the Government

“intend to restore funding for this vital work.”

I ask the Minister to clarify what exactly she and the Government mean by “restore”, and to what level. This is not just about funding for schools. If we do not fund period poverty plans, sexual health plans and water plans, we find that women and girls are the first ones to start making up the gap.

There should not just be a snappy headline with the three Es of education, empowerment and ending violence against women and girls. Those are pointless unless they are followed up behind by things that are actually going to make a difference. I pay tribute again to the hon. Member for Rotherham and her Committee, because her use of privilege to make public the equalities report showed that the Government knew that their cuts were going to affect women, girls and minorities the most—and yet they have the brass neck to suggest in this strategy that it is their priority. This is the typical doublespeak we have come to rely on from this Government. To see what the Government are actually doing, look at what they say they are doing best. By and large, people will probably find that it is the thing the Government are doing worst.

Sarah Champion: The hon. Member is making an incredibly powerful speech. She has worked so hard in this area, and I commend her for it. Does she agree that the development strategy is not a strategy? We do not know what the strategy is. This is a collection of buzzwords with a few statistics put in, but where is the underpinning vision, which is meant to be the SDGs and reducing and removing poverty? It just does not exist.

Layla Moran: The hon. Member is absolutely right: it is the strategy that is completely missing from the Government.

[Layla Moran]

This is not just about the money. We are debating the estimates and the money, so that is the right thing to focus on, but what determines whether money is being spent effectively is knowing what we want to achieve with that money. I will tell hon. Members what the Liberal Democrat vision is: the eradication of poverty, human rights for all, and a bolstering, not a deterioration, of the international rules-based order. Under our plans, the 0.7% target would be restored and a completely different approach to foreign policy delivered. I am sorry to say that the Government seem to be doing the exact opposite.

Mr Speaker: We come to the maiden speech.

5.20 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak.

In the past, I worked with the conflict, stability and security fund, so I know how important it is that international development funding of the sort that we are discussing is used well by the UK.

I must admit that, in this new job of mine, I am still learning my way around the maze of corridors, anterooms and stairways—only once so far have I ended up in the scullery. The Tiverton and Honiton constituency, which I am fortunate to represent, is made up of several other significant towns—Axminster, Seaton, Cullompton and Colyton, which brands itself a rebel town—and nearly 100 villages. It stretches from the fringes of Exmoor at Bampton to the Jurassic coast at Branscombe. I look forward to hosting you, Mr Speaker, in Honiton, where we will get to go to Allhallows Museum and see the Honiton lace that your ceremonial robe is made of.

I pay tribute to two of my predecessors as MP for the part of Devon that I will do my very best to represent. One was an MP who took up office in 2010, and the other first came to this place as MP for Tiverton in 1835; they are Neil Parish and Lord Palmerston. In his maiden speech made over a decade ago, Neil Parish said that he wanted to see fairer funding for schools. I know that he tried in earnest to seek that additional schools funding, but we are still waiting for action on that. I think here specifically about Tiverton High School. After the by-election, I was pleased to see the former Secretary of State for Education tweet that he had heard local concerns about that school. Now that he is Chancellor of the Exchequer, he should know that my constituents are still looking for action rather than tweets.

Neil Parish was a strong voice for farmers not just in Devon, but across the country. He led a rebellion of Conservative MPs on the Government's Agriculture Bill and aimed to prohibit the import of food produced to lower animal health standards and lower welfare standards than those that we use in the UK. Farmers in Devon and elsewhere are struggling to deal with the rising price of fuel, feed and fertiliser. I pledge to continue to work with bodies such as the National Farmers Union to stand up for farmers and ensure that they have a champion here in Westminster.

Every time I walk up the staircase to my office here, I find myself eyeballed by a bust of the former Foreign Secretary and former Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston. Palmerston was the MP for Tiverton for 30 years, and

he went on a journey—one recently experienced by a few of my constituents at last month's by-election. He started out a Conservative but later became a Liberal. I honestly think that is what we are hearing across the country: a groundswell of opinion from people who feel taken for granted. Just yesterday, we saw two senior members of the Cabinet quit, citing a lack of integrity, and I think that it is time for those remaining members of the Cabinet to heed the message from voters in Tiverton and Honiton at our by-election last month and show the Prime Minister the door.

Lord Palmerston was also Prime Minister, at the end of the Crimean war. He spoke about Russian foreign policy in this place 160 years ago:

"The policy and practice of the Russian Government in regard to Turkey and Persia has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other Governments would allow it to go but always to stop and retire when it has met with decided resistance."

I am much less fatalistic about Russia's expansionist ways. With a different leader at a different time, I do not suppose that Russia would be bound to invade its neighbour. But the UK is right to support Ukraine for many reasons. For me, the most important relates to the way Ukraine gave up its status as a country in possession of nuclear weapons, in part because of the assurances it received at the time from countries, including the UK, as part of the Budapest memorandum. Under the memorandum, we offered assurances to Ukraine in relation to its security. While they were not security guarantees, I see the support the UK is showing Ukraine as consistent with what we pledged back in 1994.

I suggest that the UK should show the same solidarity and ability to work with European neighbours that Britain showed during the Crimean war. Liberal democracy must be defended and preserved, regardless of who Palmerston's latest successor might be.

5.26 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). I spent many childhood summers in Cullompton, so I know what a beautiful constituency he represents. I can see already that he will be a strong advocate for his constituents, local schools—he spotted a lobbying opportunity in his maiden speech—and farmers. He displayed an internationalist outlook, which I certainly welcome, as I am sure we all do. I am delighted that he chose to speak in this debate for his maiden speech; I think that shows real acuity. What a day, here in Parliament, on which to give his maiden speech! I look forward to following him in many speeches to come.

I campaigned, along with hundreds of thousands of people across the country, for the move to 0.7%. Many are in this Chamber now, but they are also in towns, villages and cities across the country. That decision had cross-party support and was one we could all be proud of—proud to be British, and proud to achieve 0.7% of GDP on development spending. The fact that it was cut is deeply disappointing to me, to Opposition Members and to people across the country, including many of my constituents who write to me. It is very disappointing that the 0.7% target has not been reinstated in these estimates. Achieving 0.7% was the right thing to do. It was the wrong thing to do—it is a false economy—to

cut it to 0.5%. That diminishes our position in the world and has damaged many successful poverty-reducing, conflict-cutting and climate change-tackling programmes. There is a £4.6 billion black hole and 1,000 programmes have been or will be cut. It would be welcome if the Minister could confirm whether that is correct.

I want to focus not only on how much and which programmes have been cut, but on how the remaining money is spent. I am concerned about the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, and the fact that so much money in this strategy will be under the remit of ambassadors. I have spoken to many ambassadors and they have not had the training to spend development funds. They have been trained to be excellent diplomats and we are really proud of them. They do a great job for us around the world, but development expertise is very, very different. Will the Minister confirm that the training programme for ambassadors has changed as a result, right from selection through to achieving their positions? It needs to change dramatically if the money is to be spent in a way that achieves our aims.

Then we come to our aims. What are the aims of the international strategy? I have serious concerns that they are not clear, that they break our promises to achieve the sustainable development goals and that they are not to cut poverty.

Anyone who has followed any of my speeches will not be surprised by the two areas on which I will focus today, but I have not plucked them out of thin air. I have worked in development around the world for 25 years. I have worked for Christian Aid, Oxfam, CAFOD—the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development—and Water Aid. I did a round of the development agencies, which meant that I had the privilege of visiting many countries and seeing programmes that are funded by the British public around the world. Two key areas that can achieve poverty eradication are: tackling conflict, focusing especially on genocide prevention; and tackling climate change, focusing especially on water sanitation and hygiene.

Commitments have been made across the House and we have said many times in debates that we want to prevent genocide. We have stood here and said, “Never again,” and I am sure we all agree that this crime of crimes must be prevented. That has been highlighted this week by the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, which is being hosted by our Government and is happening now in London.

Religious persecution and the targeting of people because of their ethnicity go hand in hand, but to achieve the aim of “Never again” in relation to genocide, we need genocide prevention strategies across all the countries in which we work to predict when early steps towards genocide are being taken, to prevent genocide through peace building and to fund social and economic actions and targeted intervention to prevent it. There is a list of continuing genocides around the world and of areas where there are moves towards genocide. Our projects and programmes can make all the difference. They will not be glamorous or hit the headlines, but they will save lives in their millions.

The Foreign Secretary’s promise to restore the humanitarian and women and girls’ development budgets has been broken because of the aid cuts. Compared with the spend in 2020, the cuts include the Ethiopian budget by 90% and the Syrian budget by 64%. Yemen,

one of the poorest countries in the world, has had a cut of 40% and Sudan has had a 74% cut. There is an unprecedented famine in the horn of Africa, yet the cuts to humanitarian budgets continue regardless.

Last year, the British Government made famine prevention their flagship humanitarian agenda when they held the G7 presidency, and the UK played a lead role in convening discussions on famine prevention in the UN Security Council. That is—or should be—a key feature of the international development strategy, but there is a perception that the UK risks being somewhat missing in action on humanitarian aid because of the cuts. For example, in 2017, when 16 million people in the horn of Africa were facing severe hunger, the UK provided £861 million as part of the global response. That helped to avert widespread famine. The work that was done then has helped to reduce the number of people who are facing famine, even now, in the next period of crisis. Despite that, however, 23 million people in 2022 are facing famine as a result of drought, conflict and covid, but the UK has provided—bear in mind that the figure was £861 million in 2017—£72 million to support people in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. This is the worst famine in that area in 40 years, yet we have dramatically cut our support. That is not what the British people want from the aid budget.

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point and she knows at first hand the importance of our contribution to the international and aid sector, particularly on famine prevention. My Committee has just published its report on food security, and there is so much more that the Government could do to take a strategic leadership view. However, the countries that my hon. Friend mentioned, where famine is running wild, seem to be completely off the Government’s radar and hidden. One can only assume that unless we raise the profile of those countries, this will just keep going.

Fleur Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. This debate has been really important in enabling us to talk about the issues, because these cuts seem to be happening quietly and in secret. If British people knew about the cuts to famine prevention and the other things going on, they would not be happy. These are not our values; these are not British values.

The House will hear no argument from me against championing women and girls, which is in the development strategy, but the budgets for women and girls are being cut and are not being prioritised. The Government are not putting their money where their mouth is. CARE International estimates that £1.9 billion was cut from women and girls projects in 2021. I would welcome any assurance from the Minister that that is not correct and that the budgets for women and girls are being protected. I would like to hear that in her response.

The international development strategy should have poverty reduction as a target, but it does not. Instead, it talks about people being “more prosperous”. It could be said that that is just semantics—putting a positive spin on poverty by talking about prosperity instead. However, I am very concerned, as other hon. Members clearly are, that it shows a move away from poverty reduction, tackling inequality, support for the most marginalised and inclusive growth, with a focus instead on macroeconomic prosperity and the hope that it will

[Fleur Anderson]

trickle down. We know that that will not work and that it risks fuelling inequality and instability. It is a move away from achieving the sustainable development goals on the interconnected issues of poverty, inequality, climate change, inclusive societies, access to health and education, and water and sanitation.

Water and sanitation is all but missing from the international development strategy. WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—is the foundation on which any development strategy should be based. There is a lot of talk in the strategy about trade, but trade cannot increase if farmers cannot water their livestock or crops. Farmers just cannot achieve very much with no water: they face ill health and poor hygiene, or have to fetch water instead of farming and being a trading actor. It is truly frightening that the Government have cut funding for WASH by two thirds between 2018 and 2021.

Water Aid is one of the most popular and well-supported aid agencies in this country. I am not just saying that because I used to work for it; I chose to work for it because I know the importance of water and sanitation. Its popularity demonstrates how obvious it is to British people and to anyone who has travelled to any of the countries we are talking about that without clean water, sanitation and hygiene, we just cannot get the other benefits to progress for girls, for trade, for autonomy and for villages and towns. WASH is a no-regrets solution: it is really good value for money, and it fast-forwards progress in gender equality, global health, climate change and so many other areas.

Let us take gender equality as an example. The focus of the development strategy is quite rightly on women and girls, but without access to WASH, millions of women and girls will miss out on school or the chance to work and will be at greater risk of poor health, violence and abuse. Every day, approximately 800 million women and girls are on their period, yet one third do not have access to clean water, female-friendly and decent toilets, hygiene facilities and sanitary materials to manage menstruation with dignity. I have met many, many girls who miss a week of school a month, and many teachers who despair. They want to do their best, but they cannot.

Women are responsible for about 60% of household water collection needs globally. Achieving universal basic water services would free up more than 77 million working days for women each year between 2021 and 2040. The gains could be huge, so I ask the Minister: what proportion of the reinstated ODA budget for women and girls will go to programmes addressing period poverty and shame? Given its importance to the education, economic empowerment and safety of women and girls globally, will the Minister restore the UK's ODA funding for WASH?

Global health and WASH are inseparable too. The World Health Organisation estimates that one newborn baby dies every minute from infections related to a lack of clean water and hygiene. This is such a basic problem, so heartbreaking and so easily solved. More than half the healthcare centres in the world's 46 least developed countries lack clean water or decent toilets, which is causing preventable deaths and accelerating the spread of antimicrobial resistance as health workers are forced to use antibiotics in lieu of good hygiene. If any of our

local hospitals had no running water, they would close—they would not be open—but that is the situation of half the healthcare facilities in the world's poorest countries. *The Lancet* estimates that 1.27 million people died of drug-resistant infections in 2019 alone, a number that will just continue to increase as antimicrobial resistance develops, and that will affect us in this country as well: we are interconnected.

The FCDO's own analysis in December 2021 rightly recognised the importance of WASH in maternal and child health, pandemic preparedness, and building climate-resilient health systems. However, the FCDO is not putting its money where its mouth is. The financing gap preventing universal access to WASH in healthcare facilities is just \$601 million annually to 2030. That is small change for all the G7 nations, working together, and the UK should be leading the way in advocating its provision. I therefore want to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to increase access to WASH in healthcare facilities in the world's least developed countries, and whether she agrees that it must be better financed.

I also have a little shopping list of aid programmes which I know are changing, but about which I should like some further information. These are just examples of the problems that will come as a result of the disintegration—the Government seem to be disintegrating around us as we speak, but there is also this disintegration—of what used to be the DFID budget.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) raised an important issue: why are we still funding China to such a great extent, and what are those funds for? As for Sudan, has the peace programme been entirely cut? We built up that programme over many years, and we have been funding it for so long; are there any plans to reinstate it?

In Lebanon, the UK Government had been funding a very successful landmine programme to clear cluster munitions for many years. The Lebanese Government were given a five-year extension allowing them to clear their munitions by 2026, they said they were on track for 2025—and then what happened? We cut the programme. They were so close to achieving landmine eradication. They had come so far, and we had worked so well with them, and the Lebanese military, to achieve that. Farmers could have their land back, they could grow and they could trade, but they cannot achieve any of those goals in the international development strategy without that programme, so why did we cut it?

The next item on my little shopping list is the BBC World Service, the jewel in our crown. We have built up, over so many years, a trusted service. I saw its impact in Kenya, where I was living, during the post-election violence. It was the only source of information then. It is so well trusted across the world. It is a source of huge soft power for us, and I hope to hear from the Minister that it will not be subject to any of the cuts.

The final item is climate finance. On 20 June, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said that the BEIS was surrendering climate finance underspend to the Ukraine aid budget. Climate finance underspend is climate finance which has been budgeted for, for which there are plans, which has not been spent yet, but which will be spent on very important climate projects. I do not begrudge any aid going to

Ukraine, but I do want to know where the money is coming from. If we are just robbing Peter to pay Paul, what is the point of this strategy? It is not very strategic at all.

A development strategy that does not prioritise poverty reduction, conflict and genocide prevention, and WASH is not one that the British people would want to support. It breaks our promises to the world's most vulnerable people, and it further weakens our standing on the world stage.

5.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I always enjoy listening to her, because many of the things that she has a deep interest in are things that I am interested in as well—as are others in this Chamber, but for me especially it is a real pleasure. I always enjoy her recollections of where she has been in the world, the organisations she has worked with and the things she has done, and I want to say a big thank you to her for that as well. The points she has shared with us reinforce the demands and interests that we all have, but they also encourage us to work that wee bit harder to deliver some of the good things she has mentioned.

It is a pleasure to follow the new hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and to have heard his maiden speech. I wish him well in this House. I know that it can be quite daunting when someone first comes here—I know it was when I came here—and the maiden speech is a big occasion for us all. I wish him every success and every happiness as he works for his constituents in Tiverton and Honiton. He has already got the bit between his teeth as he starts trying to sort out the high school in Tiverton.

I also thank all the Members who have spoken in the debate so far, and I look forward to hearing those who will speak after me, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

It is no surprise that an effective international development strategy requires proper funding. That is what every one of us has said today. I have spoken in the past about my concerns over cuts to the foreign aid budget and the importance of ensuring that people are not made to suffer as a result of our—I say this gently—poorly judged priorities. The Government have in the past committed themselves to 0.7%, and I support that. I wish to see it in place. I wish it was, but it is not at the moment. The Government have indicated a wish to return to that come 2023-24, but in the meantime, many people in many countries across the world, including Ethiopia, Somalia and many other African countries, are suffering as a result. As a country that prides itself on offering help to nations in times of need and on helping other nations to become increasingly prosperous, we need the financial backing to turn our talk into action. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, referred to the importance of giving people opportunities. Others have also referred to that, and I am going to speak about young women and girls in particular.

Today an international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief has been taking place in London, as the hon. Member for Putney mentioned. Indeed, she and I were sitting together at the prayer breakfast just yesterday morning in Westminster Hall, and it was a really good occasion. I know the Minister is also deeply committed to that issue, and I am very pleased to have a Minister in place who is. That encourages me personally, and it also encourages many of the people who come to me about these issues. Hopefully the international conference will drive further commitment to ensuring freedom of religion or belief for all. I hope it will be just one example of the FCDO turning ideas and discussions into tangible benefits for the world's needy people. I have spoken at a couple of the fringe events here in Westminster in the last couple of days, at the QEII centre and here in the House, and I am conscious that promoting freedom of religion or belief needs to go hand in hand with human rights issues. I see them as inseparable—they must be worked on together. For me, that is quite simple to understand.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and I want to ask the Minister a question and put it on record. It relates to the special envoy, who is, as we all know, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She is helped by David Burrowes. I know that the Government and the Prime Minister have committed resources for that purpose, but I want to ask the Minister—I know the civil servants are taking note—if it is possible to have that position ringfenced for the future. The hon. Lady's role is important, because it changes lives in places across the world where freedom of religion or belief is a key issue and where human rights issues are so important. That will be the thrust of my short comments in this debate. I will reflect on some of the priorities in the FCDO's strategy for international development, how they relate to freedom of religion or belief and why it is important to give them sufficient financial backing.

As I said, freedom of religion or belief is a bellwether human right. Where it is protected, other human rights are likely to be protected. Where it is violated, other human rights are also likely to be violated. As such, international development cannot be assessed in isolation from its wider impact, as the human rights situation on the ground inevitably affects the successful delivery of international development.

I am therefore glad that one of the priorities in the FCDO's strategy for international development focuses on women and girls, and particularly on ending violence against them. As a grandfather of five, soon to be six, including three wee girls, I understand in a small way what it means to have wee girls I want to look after and protect. I want to see the same protection in this strategy, and I am pleased the Minister has said the same on the record.

I often say that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) is a real spokesperson on these global issues. Whenever she speaks, I make it my business to come and listen, because hers are always words of wisdom and encouragement, for which I commend her. I am encouraged that the Government will restore spending to previous levels in 2023 but, as inflation and prices rise across the world, will 0.7% be enough to address demand?

[Jim Shannon]

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I am frequently reminded of the dire situation that so many women and girls face around the world. It is always hard to listen to such things, and I find it incredibly difficult. The Aid to the Church in Need report “Hear Her Cries” was released earlier this year. It documents the horrific persecution faced by women and girls around the world because of their religion or belief, and the double vulnerability they suffer due to their gender. Women and girls from religious minorities in many regions are targeted for abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage, which are violations of their human rights and human dignity. Human dignity is not too much to ask for, and I hope the report is given proper attention.

I will have the opportunity to go to Pakistan with the APPG in the first week of October. The last time we were there, we met a number of officials in positions of power and described to them our concern that Christian and Hindu girls as young as 12, 13 and 14 were being abducted and abused, which annoys me greatly. I would like to hear more about how the strategy will support them.

The strategy includes a priority to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance. Others have mentioned Afghanistan, a country whose people have been struck by terror since the Taliban’s takeover. I make it clear that these things are happening because of the Taliban’s takeover. I gently say to the Government and the Minister that people have nothing. They are starving. How can we get aid to them by bypassing the Taliban, or however it can happen? I do not have the answers, but I ask the question.

Humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan is clearly a necessity, but more must be done to ensure that aid reaches the most vulnerable. I have an observation, not a criticism. The Government published a list of groups in Afghanistan that are deemed to be at most risk, to which vulnerable religious and belief groups were eventually added. It is good that they were added, and it is important to see how we can help. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that the most vulnerable are reached. Of course, no limit should ever be put on humanitarian aid, but programmes must not be complacent in their trust that aid reaches the most vulnerable. We are visiting Pakistan in the first week of October. I see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, in her place. She is the vice-chair of the all-party group and I know she has a deep interest in these issues. The hon. Member for Rotherham also intends to travel with us, so her vast knowledge and ability will add to our having a particularly beneficial deputation.

Finally, I would like to caution against the strategy’s designation of climate change and biodiversity as the UK’s No. 1 international priority. One cannot deny the impact of climate on already vulnerable communities, and more must be done to safeguard against climate-driven disruption. The hon. Member for Putney referred knowledgeably to the importance of WaterAid, as she often does. Some of my constituents are involved in its projects, and I may mention one of them. However, climate change should not become the FCDO’s scapegoat as the main driver of other human rights violations. I work with many church groups in my constituency, and with NGOs and missionary groups, to deliver education,

health, farming, self-sustainability and employment to Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Those are just some of the projects that we do through those missionary groups in Strangford. As I said in an intervention, I am ever mindful of the knowledge of many of those missionary and church groups and NGOs on the ground in those countries. Sometimes a closer working relationship with them would be incredibly beneficial, and I would like to see that. I know that in Swaziland there is a dearth of clean water available, so that is one project on which we could be working with some of the NGOs, church groups and missionary groups. It might be possible to address that issue.

At the end of May, I visited Nigeria with the all-party group. I know that the Minister knows that, because we briefed her on the trip and she showed an incredible interest in this issue. Along with other Members of this House, I saw the threat to freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria and the fear people faced, be it in the north-east of Nigeria, the central belt—the Bible belt, they call it—or the area where there was a terrible attack in which 50 people were killed in a Roman Catholic chapel on the Sunday just as we returned. There is a real threat to freedom of religion in Nigeria.

The Government all too often attribute much of the violence in Nigeria to disputes over natural resources and competition over land exacerbated by climate change and population growth, but I would ask that that not be overemphasised to the exclusion of the freedom of religion or belief that is at the heart of this issue. We were there and we became very aware of that. The Buhari Government’s indifference and a culture of impunity allows FORB to be violated regularly, which is why Nigeria is in the top six in the world watch list. The abduction and forced marriage of Christian schoolgirl Leah Sharibu took place six years ago—it is hard to believe it was that far back—and it cannot be blamed on global warming. Nor can the 24-year term of imprisonment of the humanist Mubarak Bala, who posted on Facebook and was charged with blasphemy.

As I said, when we look at FORB issues, we speak up for those with Christian belief, those with other belief and those with no belief. We do that because we believe, as I clearly do, that my God loves everybody, and I believe we must speak up for others. So when we were there in Nigeria we made representations to the Nigerian Government. The friend and colleague of the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), was there as well. He took this case on board and we are indebted to him, and we hope that we may make some progress on the blasphemy issue. We also had discussions with some of the representatives of Leah Sharibu, that wee Christian girl who never renounced her Christianity and stood firm. We hope that at some time in the future we may see something happening on that. The multifaceted human rights issues in Nigeria cannot be ignored, and attention to climate change should not be at the expense of recognising other fundamental human rights violations.

I want to pose another question to the Minister, which others have also raised and which it is important to put on the record: I cannot get my head around why China is receiving any aid whatsoever. I am flabbergasted. [Interruption.] I know the Minister will answer that. [Interruption.] Well, the night is young. [Interruption.] I am joking. [Interruption.] I have made my point and will now move on to my last paragraph.

To conclude, I commend the FCDO's efforts in international development and the knock-on impact in safeguarding FORB—freedom of religion or belief—issues for all in the future. However, I urge the Government to see the broader international development picture and ensure that their spending matches their priorities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call the Front-Bench representatives to wind up, after which Sarah Champion will get the last two minutes, I should say that Members need not worry: should we finish before 7 o'clock, under Standing Order No. 54 we will then suspend until 7 o'clock when the questions on all the motions will be put.

6.1 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), because I watched him during his speech and his hand did not shake once. That impressed me, as it is certainly not how I experienced making my maiden speech—although perhaps it is because today Operation Big Dog might finally be going to the vet for one last time. I also thank my trusted friend and colleague, and Chair of the International Development Committee the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for securing the debate. I look forward to hearing her conclusions.

This debate has gone on for more than a couple of hours and what has been striking is that we are all saying one thing: this strategy is not an international development strategy. Not one Member has stood up and supported it this afternoon. That should be the most striking feature of the debate. Rather, it is almost entirely a business and trade-focused strategy, with only one mention of the UN sustainable development goals, which are the very backbone of development and aid, and just nine mentions of poverty. Instead there is a relentless focus on business, trade, enterprise, exports, global supply chains and the private sector. As a serial entrepreneur, I get that, but that is not the first priority in the minds of those who are absolutely on their haunches and who have nothing on a day-to-day basis. Frankly, we have abandoned what an international development strategy is all about: to alleviate the most fundamental issues of starvation, persecution and all the other problems in some of the least developed and most vulnerable countries.

The Secretary of State previously held office in the Department for International Trade, so it comes as no surprise that this document could easily have originated from that Department. I have been thinking about a new title for her: the Secretary of State for Enterprise—the SS Enterprise, so she could be Captain Truss. What underpins this strategy is not poverty alleviation but trade with UK businesses. Indeed the strategy states:

“Our financing model...will deliver for people here in the UK—investments abroad will generate export opportunities in the UK, creating jobs right across the country.”

The UK Government clearly view international development as an investment and profit venture, in their own narrow nationalist interests.

The international development sector has been scathing of the plan, with Bond stating that the strategy

“seems largely driven by short-term political and economic interests rather than the attempt to tackle the root causes of global crises such as inequality, conflict and climate change, which impact us all.”

Similarly, Oxfam has said that

“this strategy prioritises aid for trade and the financialisation of development. It is clearly motivated more by tackling China than tackling poverty...By gutting its aid budget—and now putting geopolitics above poverty—the UK has fallen short of the challenge.”

Perhaps that is why no one so far has stood up and supported the strategy.

The SNP is of the firm opinion that international development should not be viewed as a business and profit venture. It should be focused on protecting and safeguarding those in the most acute need around the world. Anything else is, frankly, a complete dereliction of both moral duty and a duty as one of the world's wealthiest countries. Therefore, it is shameful that poverty is rarely mentioned in the strategy. The only mention of UN sustainable development goals is as follows—even the framing of it is appalling:

“The UK brings powerful economic and political tools to our development partnerships:”—

I agree—

“aid, diplomacy, trade, investment, expertise and influence. We will use those to meet the evolving needs of our partners, and support achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals...in line with the Integrated Review.”

I ask the Minister here today: how can a strategy that claims to be wide-ranging and holistic possibly address the UN sustainable development goals in a co-ordinated and clear manner when there is only one mention of the SDGs in the entire strategy?

By focusing heavily on trade and investment opportunities, the UK Government are implicitly prioritising economic opportunities with middle-income countries that have immediate domestic business potential, rather than with countries in dire humanitarian need whose national and economic infrastructures have been crippled by crisis. A key question therefore arises: who is the intended beneficiary of this new international development strategy? Is it aid recipients, or wealthy UK-based donors?

At the International Development Committee in May—I am glad to see a number of my colleagues from the Committee here in the Chamber—I asked the Foreign Secretary why the first case study within the international development strategy was that of Liquid Telecom, a company established in the UK, building fibre broadband in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. What sustainable goals does that achieve and how exactly does it reduce poverty? It has been estimated that 73% of the Congolese population live on less than \$1.90 a day, yet UK aid to the DRC has been cut by around 60%.

Last year, 19 aid agencies appealed to the FCDO, stating that 27.3 million people in the DRC—*[Interruption.]* I do hope the Minister is listening while she is on the phone. Some 27.3 million people in the DRC are experiencing acute food insecurity. Action Against Hunger stated that the UK aid cut to the Democratic Republic of the Congo—I hope the Minister is listening at this point—would kill 50,000 children who would otherwise have survived.

[Chris Law]

There is no mention of any uplift in ODA food and nutrition programmes within the strategy, despite the current global food crisis—it is bonkers—and despite its being one of the key goals of the SDGs. However, the strategy says:

“We will make more targeted investments of our resources and our efforts in fragile states or where there are compelling trade and investment opportunities.”

This strategy should be in the bin. Why is the broadband provision being highlighted in this strategy, instead of its addressing acute food insecurity? Can the Minister answer the question that the Foreign Secretary could not answer: at what point does a trade or investment opportunity become more compelling than saving starving children's lives?

The strategy is rhetoric-heavy and spending-light and fails to make any explicit funding references to health, education, food, or women and girls' programmes. For example, the strategy commits to: increasing access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics; building stronger health systems; ending preventable deaths; and investing in research and innovation. However, it does not mention how those aims will be achieved, or how much funding has been earmarked for these efforts. [Interruption.] I am trying to deliver a speech! The Minister needs to hear what I have to say. Similarly, there are commitments to education, empowerment and ending violence for women and girls, but no detailed funding commitments, and no references to wider educational targets for boys and young men.

The Foreign Secretary has also said that she would restore the budget for women and girls to £745 million, which sounds honourable, but CARE International estimates that the FCDO would have to provide £1.9 billion to restore spending levels for gender equality to 2020 levels, so that money is a fraction, and what is being claimed is not true. There is lots of rhetoric, but little, if anything, of the detail.

Crucially, the International Development strategy provides no concrete roadmap to reinstating the 0.7% aid budget, and boy what timing! As we heard earlier, the G7 was coming to UK, and all of its members stepped up to the plate as we stepped down.

The Government's approach is also bonkers at a time when the planet is facing multiple crises. Let me list just a few. The UK Government have cut health and medical funding during a global pandemic. They have cut food programmes during a looming global food security crisis. They have cut environmental projects in the midst of a climate crisis. And—you couldnae make this up—they have cut conflict-resolution projects at a time of renewed war. Those cuts cost lives. Analysis has shown that over 7 million children have lost access to education, 12 million babies will not receive nutritional support and over 100,000 unvaccinated children will die. Yes, that is death as a result of the UK's callous decision to cut the aid budget—I hope I am clear. These death-sentence cuts are as miserable and rotten as the core of this Government today. It is morally and pragmatically indefensible that this UK Government continue actively to jeopardise the lives and wellbeing of the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

Let us put this issue in the current political context. Ever since he came into office, the Prime Minister has been intent on dismantling and reversing the UK's leadership on international development—his ideologically driven departmental merger, savage budget cuts and now this aid-for-trade strategy have put that beyond doubt. He has aligned policy more closely with the manifesto commitments made by Nigel Farage when he was leader of the Brexit party and UKIP; he has dismissed cross-party consensus in this Chamber; and he has U-turned on his own party's manifesto and the Government's legally binding commitments. With his time in No. 10 coming—rapidly—to an end, I hope those irresponsible actions and callous attitudes towards the world's poorest and most vulnerable are reversed as swiftly as possible.

I also live in hope that those on the Government Benches who have defied their leadership and their party Whips make the case for a return to 0.7% of GNI, with that money focused on poverty alleviation more loudly than ever before. I even dream that those who voted for these destructive policies for narrow, short-term reasons or for their own personal political advancement will reflect on the damage they have done to the UK's reputation, to the UK's national interest and, most importantly, to the millions of people who have lost out on life-saving support which was destroyed at the stroke of a pen and without a tinge of regret.

Over the past three years we on the SNP Benches have been resolute in our opposition to the Government's international development policies and in our support for a fully funded aid budget targeting those in acute need. We will continue to push the UK Government into adopting an international development framework akin to the good global citizen policy proposed in the Scottish Government's recently published “Global Affairs Framework”. We are committed to prioritising the furthest behind first, instead of politicising aid. We will amplify marginalised voices on global issues such as migration, human rights, biodiversity and the climate crisis. We have committed to listening and acting in response to often unheard voices, especially those of women and young people and those from the global south. We will always aim to be a good global citizen, no matter what challenges may emerge and irrespective of the behaviour of others. That is fundamental to everything we do internationally, and it is at the core of why we in the SNP are true internationalists and put our money where our mouth is.

The Scottish Government, with the Scottish Parliament's meagre devolved powers in the field of international development, have already taken wide-ranging positive action. Scotland was the world's first nation to set up a dedicated climate justice fund, which will double to £24 million over the next four years. At COP26 we were also the world's first nation to commit to a loss and damage fund. Rather than cut aid, the Scottish Government will increase their international development fund from £10 million to £15 million during this Parliament. Scotland is already demonstrating that it sees international development very differently from the UK Government and is stepping up to make its global contribution, rather than retreating inwards and focusing on self-interest.

With the referendum on Scottish independence coming in October 2023, it is time to set out our hopes and ambitions for what Scotland could and should do differently

as a good global citizen in the international community. Scotland can and wants to do better. I envisage an entirely different, more progressive and more humane way of delivering on our international development commitments.

For example, I would like an independent Scotland to make helping the furthest behind first, and alleviating poverty, the basis for all international development policy within a separate department for international development. I want an independent Scotland to commit in law to spending the UN target of 0.7% of GNI on official development assistance and fully embed the UN's sustainable development goals and grand bargain commitments into its international development strategy. Scotland has an opportunity to lead the way in decolonising development, ensuring that development projects are partner rather than donor led, and promoting the establishment of a decolonisation officer within Scotland's department for international development.

I will finish on this. I believe without doubt that as a progressive, outward-looking and truly internationalist nation, focusing on core themes such as conflict, health, climate and gender equality, an independent Scotland will not only have profound potential for positive change but will be a key partner, leader and influencer, committed to the most vulnerable peoples across the world, to do more, to do better and to deliver a fairer and more just global future.

6.15 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—the Chair of the International Development Committee—and the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate. My hon. Friend and the Committee she chairs do remarkable work on behalf of this House to hold the Government to account, however challenging that has been over the past two years. I also thank all hon. Members who supported the application and the many who spoke powerfully during the debate and made important points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said that the Government's priority is trade, not reducing poverty, and she said that they must get the foundations right. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), a previous Secretary of State, stated that when British leadership was needed the most, the Government chose the worst possible time to cut the aid budget. He said that everyone has recognised the merger with the FCO as a disaster, and of course I agree with him. I thank him for all his work and for speaking up for the world's poorest. Like many Members, he also made a strong point on the different skillsets between DFID and diplomatic staff.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), another former Secretary of State, knows the issues well and emphasised that the Prime Minister's decision to abolish DFID, breaking his word, was a mistake. He rightly asked who Samantha Power will call to discuss development, and said that in a world with uncertainty, Britain must be seen as an honest, trusted partner and that that harm must be undone.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) spoke about the role of the International Development Committee in ensuring that taxpayers get value for money.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who was also previously a Minister in DFID, made strong arguments against the cuts.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) made a passionate speech, stating that the heart of the debate is the fact that “when the world needed us to step up, we stepped back”,

that the crisis of food fragility is not going to sort itself out and that the aid cut only makes things worse. On the SDRs, he exposed the incompetence across Government, saying that they clearly have no grip on the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), a former Minister, spoke passionately about the moral case and what a mistake it had been to axe the Department. I thank him for all his excellent work. He also made an important point about the different skillsets and the fact that the new administration must listen to those with experience, and called on Government to reverse the cuts and the merger.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) spoke passionately about the impact of cuts and the vandalism of the merger of DFID. It was a pleasure to hear the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). I wish him the very best; I thank him for making his maiden speech in this important debate and I look forward to working with him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) campaigned for the 0.7% target for development spending, a cause that she said was cross-party and a proud moment for Britain. She has expertise in this area and is a champion for development because she knows at first hand that it works. My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always speaks in these important debates, made an impassioned speech on the importance of freedom of religion or belief, saying that it is a human right.

We have heard much today about the appalling human cost of the aid cuts over the past two years. We have heard how 7.1 million children—more than half the child population of the UK—lost out on their education; how 72 million people missed out on expected treatment for neglected tropical diseases; how, in the middle of a pandemic, this Government unconscionably pulled funding for research, health programmes and hand-washing; and how, just months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this Government cut £350 million from their conflict, stability and security fund and conflict prevention work.

Labour has been calling over the past year for the international development strategy to be published, because we know it was an important chance to set out how Britain will rise to the global challenges of the next decades. It was a chance for the Foreign Secretary to reset after the damage of the past two years and rebuild.

We live in unprecedented times, and the need for Britain to return to the international stage could not be greater. The global food security crisis is growing fast, putting millions more at risk of famine. Already, in the Horn of Africa, aid agencies estimate that one person is dying every 48 seconds. The UN now reports that over 100 million people—1% of the global population—are on the move, displaced from their homes. Even as the extreme wealth of a handful of individuals has soared during the pandemic, 263 million more people will crash into extreme poverty this year, making a mockery

[Preet Kaur Gill]

of the notion that wealth trickles down. From the Sahel to California and the Pacific, the planet is on fire, and that needs an unprecedented response. The British public have played their part, whether by helping neighbours through covid or by opening their wallets and their homes for Ukrainian refugees. Civil servants at FCDO have played their part, working all hours to keep life-saving programmes afloat, even if their reward is a plan to reduce their number by up to 40%.

We needed this Government to play their part and come forward with a serious plan. That is why, prior to the strategy's publication, I set out five basic tests that would allow the Opposition to support the Government. First, after the shutdown of DFID, is the strategy serious about restoring Britain's development expertise? Secondly, would it provide the resources needed and return the UK to 0.7%? Thirdly, is it serious about targeting aid to those most in need? Fourthly, given the war, pandemic and climate emergency we face, would it protect climate, health and conflict as priorities? Finally, would it make the long-term, positive case for development, because we know it works? These are simple and reasonable tests. They are not complicated or designed to trip the Government up. They are, I hope, tests that many Conservative Members and Members in all parts of the House would want to see met. The sad truth is that this strategy does not meet a single one of these most basic tests.

Let us be generous and first look at the Government's plan on their own terms. They say that they want to boost British investment. Presumably that is why last year British International Investment, the Government's development finance arm, invested almost £600 million in DP World, the Dubai-owned parent company of P&O Ferries, famous for its so-called efficiencies. It was the biggest investment in BII's 73-year history, and more than three times our entire bilateral aid last year to the Americas, Europe and the Pacific combined. I have written to the Government about this before, but I ask again: what assurances can the Minister now provide that ODA funds that are required by law to be spent on poverty reduction are not subsidising a race to the bottom for workers in Britain and abroad? Under the new strategy, will we see more or fewer investments of this kind?

The Government say that they want to prioritise humanitarian assistance. That is quite right, with war in Ukraine, famine in east Africa and economic collapse in Afghanistan, but if this is a top priority for the UK, why exactly did the Government cut £787 million—over half their humanitarian funding—last year, and why, in the new strategy, do the Government commit only to spending £3 billion over the next three years? On average, that will be a cut of a third from the pre-pandemic level.

The Government say that helping women and girls is a priority. The FCDO's own equalities assessment warned last year that aid cuts would affect millions of women and girls, but the Government went ahead anyway, leaving what charities say is a £1.9 billion gap. Despite the Government's manifesto promise to educate more girls, the ONE Campaign has calculated that, in practice, 3.7 million girls lost out on an education because of this Prime Minister's decision to cut aid. I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary has promised to restore

funding levels for women and girls to pre-pandemic levels this year, but does the Minister accept that stand-alone funding for women and girls will mean little if other programmes giving them access to health, education and nutrition continue to be cut?

On the promise of a new Indo-Pacific tilt, the new strategy says nothing about how it will reverse the £506 million—32%—cuts made to the region in 2021. The strategy declares that the UK will

“sustain its commitment to Africa”,

but says nothing about how it will reverse the cuts of £864 million, or 39%, made to the region in 2021.

The strategy promises that multilaterals will “remain essential partners”. Global crises demand global solutions, so in an increasingly multipolar world, what could be more important? In practice, however, bilateral spending will account for 75% of the pot by 2025. That means that hundreds of millions more pounds will be cut in the coming months from the already stretched budgets of the UN and other multilateral agencies. It will mean that programmes are ended and life-changing services for the world's poorest terminated.

There is a common thread: the strategy has many warm words and promises much, but until this Government restore the UK's 0.7% commitment, it simply will not be able to deliver on these priorities. Even on its own terms, the strategy cannot succeed. Without money behind it, the strategy is barely worth the paper it is written on.

Labour understands the importance of honouring the 0.7% pledge, and in government we would return to it. The Government say that they will return to 0.7% as soon as the fiscal situation allows and as soon as their tests have been met, but let us remember that it was on a temporary basis that one year ago, Members of this House voted by a narrow majority of just 35 to approve the cuts. Since the March 2022 spring statement, the tests are now expected to be met in 2023-24 rather than in 2024-25, so can the Minister confirm whether the Government will use their autumn Budget to set the timeline to return to 0.7%, instead of kicking the issue into the long grass? If not, may I kindly suggest that the Minister has a word with the new Chancellor, if he is still in post?

I have also received confirmation that the Business Secretary has returned £100 million of Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy international climate finance for 2022-23 to the Treasury, only months into the financial year. That is not an underspend, but a cut. In the integrated review, this Government said that climate was their No. 1 international priority, but we know that the cuts undermined our standing in negotiations in a crucial year at COP26, and developing countries can block agreements, which is in no one's interest. A year after COP26, crops are failing across the Earth because of extreme heat, and millions of east Africans face famine. How is anyone meant to trust a word this Government say?

When it comes to our aid budget, the spirit is as important as the letter of the law. I know that many Members share my outrage at the use of accounting tricks to further reduce aid spending. For every spare vaccine that the Government have so far donated, they reportedly paid just £2.30, but they are charging £4.30 to the aid budget, which means that £100 million less will, in practice, be spent on crises in such places as Afghanistan,

Yemen and Tigray. Given that the Government are yet to share and cost the remaining 77 million vaccines they promised, it could mean another £330 million being charged to the aid budget, in turn reducing ODA spending elsewhere. Can the Minister confirm today that future vaccine donations will be counted as additional to, rather than within, the 0.7% this year?

I have outlined at some length how the strategy fails on its own terms. That should be a real concern to Government Members, even where they agree with the Government's priorities. This strategy will also fail because it also fundamentally is the wrong set of priorities to guide Britain's international development policy over the coming decade. The Foreign Secretary writes in the foreword that the strategy is designed to help the UK take on what she calls "malign actors". She says that she wants to offer an alternative to China's belt and road initiative. That is why the strategy promises so much on investment in infrastructure and trade and why it abandons many of the UK's priorities on poverty reduction and leaving no one behind, but it cannot be an either/or option.

It is true that we live in an increasingly multipolar world, with powers outside the G7 holding more cards than ever before. That is exactly why we need more bridge-building, not less. Britain must help to solve the world's problems together with others, and not mimic China and go it alone—we need internationalism, not isolationism.

After he resigned recently, Moazzam Malik, the Foreign Secretary's director general for Africa, spoke out powerfully about the choice at hand. He said that if development co-operation

"is used as a bargaining chip in a transactional geopolitical game, it will deliver poor value, weak impact, lead to scandals, and damage the UK's credibility internationally."

He went on:

"In all its work, FCDO must seek to smooth the path to a multi-polar world. That means new alliances...internationalism...and some deep humility."

He concluded that the

"answer to a more contested world isn't endless contestation but endless collaboration."

That is the choice at hand on international development. We could be working with our partners, such as the US, at the G7 to negotiate the ambitious action needed on climate change, on vaccinating the world and on our global economic crisis. Instead, Samantha Power, the head of USAID, is reduced to calling the UK out publicly for cutting aid to sub-Saharan Africa in the middle of a global food crisis.

We could be leading the way as we once did, inspiring our partners to do development differently and to address the challenges of the coming decade, but let us be honest: Britain has been in retreat under this Government. Since shutting down our world-renowned international development partner, we do not even send Ministers to many high-level meetings at the World Bank, the UN and other institutions where we have a seat at the table. At a time when we should be shaping the global response to climate change, the pandemic and the global cost of living crisis, we are missing in action.

Our allies and partners see the chaos unfolding under this Prime Minister. The truth is that the Conservatives do not have what it takes to govern. Britain is missing

from the world stage and stuck with a Government and a Prime Minister with no plan. The Opposition know, however, that global crises demand global solutions. Unilateral compassion is not enough: we must face outwards, broker international partnerships as equals, and resolve differences where they exist.

The choice is clear. The strategy does nothing to point the way to a better future. The Opposition stand for endless collaboration, not endless contestation. That is what makes us an internationalist party and that is why we will restore 0.7% and bring Britain back to the international table as a trusted partner when we enter government. There have long been many supporters of endless collaboration on both sides of the House; we heard powerful contributions from many of them today. Support for international development is not, and should not be, a party political issue. Together, we now have a real chance to pressure the new Government and the new Chancellor to bring back the 0.7% commitment with a clear timeline. I hope the Minister will work with me to do that. The lives and futures of millions of the world's poorest people depend on it.

6.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the Chair of the International Development Committee, for securing this debate. The Minister for Asia and the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), who is our lead on international development, is in the Gulf on ministerial duties so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is good to see a collection of colleagues from both sides of the House who care passionately about what we do to support the most vulnerable people in the world and those who are often living in the poorest conditions.

I note that the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the SNP spokesperson, said that he wanted detail not rhetoric, so I will try to address as many of the comments that have been raised as possible. Before I do, many hon. Members pointed out that the UK has a proud record of leadership on international development that goes back many years. Since 2011, international climate finance has helped more than 88 million people to cope with the effects of climate change and has installed 2,400 MW of clean energy. That is important because time and again, the most vulnerable and poorest countries in the world are bearing the brunt of climate change. If we do not help them to adapt, cope with that and change the way they live, they will continue to be pushed back into more vulnerability.

In 2013, we became the first G7 country to achieve the target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on official development assistance. Even last year, in the middle of the pandemic, under the G7 presidency, we managed to get leaders from across the world to pledge more than £1 billion vaccine doses, either directly through their own contributions or through COVAX, to the world's poorest countries.

Mr Mitchell: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Vicky Ford: I will try to address some of the comments. I will come to global health budgets, which my right hon. Friend raised.

The global pandemic was in nobody's manifesto. We faced the worst economic contraction for more than 300 years. Our borrowing in 2021 was the highest that it has ever been outside wartime. It was a really difficult decision to reduce the ODA spend from 0.7% to 0.5%, but it is a temporary reduction and we are still the third-largest donor in the G7 as a percentage of GNI that we spend. We are committed to returning to 0.7% as soon as the fiscal situation allows, and we have set out the way in which that will be measured.

Looking at the next decade and beyond, the international development strategy recognises that the evolving development landscape is characterised by many major global challenges and shifting geopolitics. For many years, increasing openness, free markets, free trade and shared technology have helped to underpin global development progress, and that is important in being able to make sure that those in the developing world can try to access some of the opportunities we have. However, that whole era of progress has been completely challenged and set back by the new geopolitical context demonstrated by Putin's illegal, unjustifiable and brutal invasion of Ukraine, which is causing these huge spirals in fertiliser, food and fuel prices.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) was absolutely spot-on when she spoke about Russian misinformation. It is really important to remind ourselves as well as others that the UK sanctions in place are not preventing exports of Russian grain and fertiliser to third countries. It is Russia's illegal blockade that is preventing Ukrainian grain from leaving the country, and that is what is hurting global supplies. The economic pain hitting the world's poorest most acutely is being caused by Putin's aggression.

The new hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), in his maiden speech, quite rightly spoke about reminding everybody of the importance of the Budapest convention, when Ukraine gave up what I believe was the world's largest collection of nuclear weapons in return for the promise that Russia, as well as others, would respect its territorial integrity. We absolutely stand by the people of Ukraine in many ways. We are one of the leading bilateral donors. We have committed about £400 million in economic and humanitarian grant support, which is in addition to about £800 million in guarantees on World Bank lending to Ukraine. We are using a lot of guarantees to increase the amount of funding we can make available.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) asked whether we are adhering to international laws and what constitutes ODA, and I am very pleased to say that we are. The rules are set out by the OECD's development assistance committee, and the DAC definition of ODA makes it very clear that no military equipment or services are reportable as ODA, so I hope that answers his question.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire mentioned the importance of making sure that UK branding is included in what we are doing, so that while we are supporting developing countries, people know that the UK is standing beside them. I absolutely agree with that, and I would also say to Members in this House who care so passionately about international

development that it is important that they remind people what good work is done with the money the UK taxpayer spends there.

I have attended the World Bank meeting—we do attend these meetings, and I regularly attend international meetings—and encouraged the World Bank to be giving a clearer message about the support it is giving and reminding those in donor countries how important this is.

Liam Byrne: The World Bank has just mobilised \$170 billion of emergency response to the current crisis, but the first question everybody I have spoken to in the World Bank over the last year is: why on earth has the UK cut its commitment to the World Bank when we could be using that to mobilise more money in the future?

Vicky Ford: I am so glad that the right hon. Member has raised this point because the UK remains one of the top six largest shareholders of the World Bank. We are one of only six countries in the world that has its own voice at the World Bank spring and autumn meetings, and we use that very powerfully. We remain the third largest donor to IDA20 and we remain the fifth largest shareholder. We reduced our donations to IDA, bringing them in line with what we are doing elsewhere in the world through the international development strategy, but we remained the third largest donor. Indeed, the World Bank announced that it would release \$170 billion at the spring meetings partly because the UK worked with our partners to say to the World Bank, "We are in unprecedented times and we need an unprecedented package."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) raised in his excellent remarks the situation in the horn of Africa, which is absolutely dire. The UK was one of the first to step up. In January, I was in the horn of Africa and announced additional money, which was, as the hon. Member for Dundee West said, especially to help babies, children and feeding mothers. Since then, we have helped to convene an international conference and worked with the UN to have a roundtable that raised another \$400 million. We will be putting more than £150 million of humanitarian aid into east Africa this year. To follow up the question from the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) about the World Bank, we have been encouraging it to put some of that \$170 billion urgently into the horn of Africa.

Liam Byrne rose—

Vicky Ford: I will make some more progress, because I want to answer many other questions.

Major global challenges are threatening the progress made over previous years. We had seen progress, especially in the last decade, but that has reversed in the last two years, which is partly to do with covid and partly to do with climate change. In that context, it is really important that our international development strategy provides a clear framework to enable people and countries to take control of the future.

Yes, a priority of the strategy is to deliver reliable investments through British investment partnerships, building on the UK's financial expertise and the strength of the City of London. That is a way in which we can help, using Government—taxpayers'—money to bring

more money into developing countries. That must be done in a way that also delivers on green priorities and supports countries to grow their economies sustainably. A key aspect of that is helping countries with the lowest incomes to build their trade capacity and infrastructure. That is not about putting all of our funding in the trade basket; it is about looking at ways in which we can harness investment to make a real difference for countries.

For example, I was in Sierra Leone earlier this year—I have visited 14 African countries since I took on this role, and Sierra Leone is one of those that most needs international development assistance—and one project that I saw was a solar microgrid. We have 95 of them going up across the country, and they are helping more than 300,000 people to get access to electricity. That means that kids can do their school work in the evening, that a sole trader can run her business and get herself an income and livelihood and, most importantly, that local services can get access to electricity. In the same town, I visited the women's health clinic that we helped set up, where we have worked on training for those delivering babies and on bringing in oxygen services, blood bank services and electricity. That has reduced maternal deaths from one in 25—one in 25 women having a baby was dying—to one in 250. Putting infrastructure investment into that microgrid enabled the oxygen services and blood to be kept in the fridge. That helped to save lives and meant that lights were on when women were delivering their babies at night. As all of us who are mothers know, many women choose to have their babies at night—I have gone slightly off my speech.

Another priority is to empower women and girls. We want to tackle the social, economic and political structural barriers that hold them back, and unlock their potential. Indeed, restoring the funding for women and girls has been a key priority for the Foreign Secretary. I cannot put back the money that was not restored last year, so, in answer to the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), the funding is being restored going forward, and it does include areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights. I believe that that is absolutely central to women's and girls' fundamental right to have control over their lives and bodies.

Sarah Champion: Can the Minister confirm whether that will also include safe abortions?

Vicky Ford: Yes, the Chair of the International Development Committee is right. There are countries where part of our support is access to safe abortions. That is a vital part of the UK's support.

The whole of the women and girls strategy is centred around three different areas, which we call the three E's: education, empowerment and ending violence. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, they all need to work together to support women. That will be set out in the forthcoming women and girls strategy.

Why do we not mention boys' education and always mention girls? It is because girls often face extra barriers to get into school. When we can remove the barriers for the girls, we help the boys as well.

Our third priority is to step up our humanitarian work to prevent the worst forms of human suffering. We are prioritising £3 billion for that over the next three years. We are also leading globally in driving a more

effective international response to crises. I mentioned earlier what we have done on leveraging other donors to come and help us in the horn of Africa. We continue to support humanitarian multilateral aid agencies through core contributions to them. That funding enables the humanitarian system to undertake essential work in providing humanitarian assistance to those most in need.

Another vital priority is to take forward our work on climate change, nature and global health, putting the commitments of our G7 and COP26 presidencies, and our global leadership in science and technology, at the core of our offer. On climate, we are delivering more than £1 billion of activities this year as part of our flagship five-year, £11.6 billion international climate finance target. Another event I went to earlier this year was the annual general meeting of the African Development Bank, where the UK signed the landmark guarantee with the bank that will enable it to unlock \$2 billion of funding. No other country is stepping up in this way. That funding will be able to go directly into parts of Africa to help to build climate resilience and is the sort of innovative way we are using our financial powers to get support to the poorest parts of the world.

On covid, I remind the Select Committee Chair that we were at the forefront of the international response to covid-19. We pledged up to £1.2 billion to address the impacts of the pandemic.

Mr Mitchell: I am sorry to intervene on my hon. Friend now, because it was the earlier point she was pursuing that I wanted to come in on. She mentioned the British support for Africa in respect of vaccinations and covid, which of course is very welcome. The Prime Minister promised in this House a year ago that Africa would have 100 million vaccinations within a year. One year on, it has had 32 million. Can the Minister tell the House when the other 68 million will arrive?

Vicky Ford: What I can tell my right hon. Friend is that access to vaccines in Africa is not the issue at the moment. There are plenty of vaccines around. I have been working closely with African organisations on this issue. Today, there is not a shortage of vaccines per se. There are challenges in getting them enhanced and there are challenges in overcoming not necessarily vaccine hesitancy but people not prioritising having the vaccine. For example, I went to a vaccine clinic in Kenya where people are asked, when they walk through the door, which type of vaccine they would like. They are told, "If you go here, you can have AstraZeneca. If you go there, you can have Pfizer. If you go there, you can have Johnson & Johnson". There are vaccines, but the issue is getting them into arms. We are working with four of the most challenged countries in Africa to help to get the different vaccines through. This issue is not about the donation.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: Let me try to address hon. Members' questions first, because I have only another few minutes and Members have been sitting here throughout the debate.

[Vicky Ford]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for her passionate discussion of neglected diseases, including podocytosis, which she now knows is a new one to me. What she said was very moving, and I will look into it further—what she said was very moving—and I reassure her that we are reviewing the Global Fund seventh replenishment investment case. I hope that that gives her the confidence she needs.

Our development priorities will be achieved by taking a patient approach to development. That means unlocking the power of people, ideas and institutions and tackling the causes of crisis, as that is the basis for delivering lasting growth, stability and poverty reduction. This is about getting the system to work.

Alongside ODA, we harness trade, defence, diplomacy and other UK strengths to work for lasting policy change in partner countries. We spend more of our budget directly. By 2025, the FCDO intends to spend about three quarters of the funding allocated in the current spending review through country programmes. That does not mean turning our back on multilateral partners. We will maintain a wide range of partnerships with multilateral organisations. They remain key partners for achieving shared objectives and tackling global challenges that the UK alone cannot solve. Geographically, we maintain our commitment to Africa, while we continue to focus on the Indo-Pacific, including by expanding the work of British International Investment in the region.

On the commitment to Africa, we are committed to building partnerships with African countries, leading to a freer, safer, more prosperous, healthier and greener continent. We prioritise key strategic partners such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Ghana. We will target how we spend resources in fragile states or countries that need extra support, and we partner with the African Union when we see that our interests align and add value.

One of the questions from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), was about Ethiopia. In the last financial year, we spent roughly £240 million of ODA in Ethiopia. That is about 7% of the entire UK spend. Ethiopia is a very important country. It is a very fragile state, particularly with famine in the south and conflict in the north. We have consistently called on all parties to work towards the ceasefire, which remains very fragile. Aid is flowing. It is not enough, but large proportions of the aid that is flowing is going on trucks that have been bought with UK aid, because we are one of the key contributors in that area.

Liam Byrne: I hope that the Minister may come on to not just the £10 billion of the aid budget, but the Government's strategy on the £19 billion of special drawing rights.

Vicky Ford: Let me come to the special drawing rights; I was about to go through more of the specific questions that Members asked. We have committed to channelling up to £4 billion of our special drawing rights. The first £1 billion has already been committed as additional funding to the IMF's poverty reduction and growth trust. In addition, the Chancellor made a commitment in April this year to allocate another

£2.5 billion to the new IMF resilience and sustainability trust. That fills a crucial gap in the IMF's toolkit. It provides affordable financing to low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries to address long-term challenges.

At the African Development Bank meetings that I attended in Ghana this year, I also explained that I was very keen to channel some of our SDRs through the ADB. Technically, the money does not come to us—it remains a shareholding in the bank. We cannot do that by ourselves; we have to do it collectively with some of the other owners of SDRs. I say that just to update the right hon. Gentleman that we are working on the matter. There are some technical issues as well.

Liam Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: No, because I want to get on to some of the right hon. Gentleman's other points.

On ICAI, the budget is not actually reduced; it was to be a flat budget. In line with the framework agreement, we will consult with the International Development Committee if any changes to ICAI's budget will have a significant impact on the Committee's work plan. With ICAI, we will also work through whatever funding gap it may have, to understand what the impact could be.

Jim Shannon rose—

Vicky Ford: On China—

Jim Shannon: Go ahead, then. That is impressive.

Vicky Ford: Why do we send programme aid to China at all? We have reduced it by 95% and we do not send any direct aid, but sometimes there are projects that are important for human rights. For example, we funded an important piece of research by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute called “Uyghurs for sale”, which did a huge amount of good in exposing forced labour in China. There are elements that are doing really important work. I hope that that example is useful.

On tied aid, we are untangling aid in line with and beyond the work of the Development Assistance Committee, the global group of major development donors.

BEIS has recently announced that it will not be sending any more ODA aid to China. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield wants more detail about what it has done; I can confirm that there is no ODA aid spent in Chinese prisons. I hope that that has answered some of his questions.

I was asked why we were not at the UNRWA meeting at ministerial level. We were there at a senior official level, where we pledged. The meeting took place in New York in the same week that the Minister for Asia and the Middle East was visiting an UNRWA-supported refugee camp in Jerusalem. I hope that that explains what the Minister was doing.

I have not answered all hon. Members' questions, but I hope that I have answered a number of them and explained why our international development work is so important. I commend it to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will now ask Sarah Champion to briefly wind up. You might as well speak until just a few seconds before 7 o'clock so that we do not need to suspend.

6.57 pm

Sarah Champion: I want to begin by thanking all the aid workers around the world, who work in some incredibly dangerous and challenging situations. They do it quietly; they do it because they care about people and want to make a difference.

I also thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate. I hope that the Minister has listened to the words of former DFID Ministers, former Treasury Ministers and former aid workers with a wealth of experience. This is all about meeting our international obligations to the most vulnerable and the poorest in the world, not in a political way but in a cross-party way, because we care about this. Why do we care? Because in the past two years, another 100 million people have been forced into extreme poverty—by covid, by climate change, by conflict. The majority have been women and girls. All the issues could have been addressed if we had worked internationally with our partners and used our money wisely.

When we talk about the commitment to 0.7%, it is not about the number. It is about the strategy to alleviate poverty around the world and develop low and middle-income countries around the world so that everybody can have a healthy, prosperous, educated future with Governments who are stable and respect human rights. We can achieve that by working together and by working with our partners on the ground.

I urge the Minister to listen to everything that has been said today; to make sure that the taxpayers' money that the Government have been gifted to look after is spent as wisely as possible so that we can meet our goals and international commitments; and to work with our international partners so that, hopefully, everybody can have a safe future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It being 20 seconds before 7 o'clock, I will just talk for 20 seconds and entertain the House, as I am required by Standing Order No. 54 to put the Questions at 7 o'clock. Now we have another five seconds, and who knows what could happen in five seconds in this place today? [*Laughter.*]

7 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54)

ESTIMATES 2022-23

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £70,686,826,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022–23,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £590,758,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £71,733,460,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £9,799,643,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022–23,

- (2) further resources, not exceeding £16,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £9,799,655,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £68,942,475,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022–23,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £12,398,837,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £31,481,483,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £18,800,792,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022–23,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £21,623,660,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £54,021,048,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £4,658,807,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 396 of Session 2022–23,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £1,379,354,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £5,087,990,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Question on the outstanding estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

MAIN ESTIMATES 2022-23

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £236,591,882,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1241 of Session 2021–22, and HC 52, HC 116, HC 174, HC 176, HC 239 and HC 396 of Session 2022–23,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £41,024,815,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £183,903,343,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Simon Clarke, Lucy Frazer and Helen Whately bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Lucy Frazer accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2023; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2022.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 137).

Business without Debate**DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)***Ordered,*

That the Motion in the name of Mark Spencer relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

Health Services: Southend West

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

7.2 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Let me begin by saying what a huge pleasure it is to be holding my first Adjournment debate since my election in February—and on such an uneventful day! Let me also thank Mr Speaker for granting a debate on a subject that is so important to everyone in Southend West; and I am particularly pleased to see that we still have a Minister here to respond to it.

Making Southend West healthier is my absolute priority, and I want to say a huge thank you to all our brilliant local NHS workers. Their incredibly hard work is an inspiration to us all, and it is no exaggeration to say that our country would simply not function without them. However, it was very clear during my election campaign that, sadly, our local healthcare system was simply not up to scratch. Since my election, my mailbox has been dominated by problems with our hospital, with our ambulance service, with 111 and with GPs. Literally every day I receive complaints from constituents, and I have promised to do something about it.

There are four issues that I want to focus on this evening. The first is Southend University Hospital. The hospital lies right at the heart of my constituency, and the tower—which I had the pleasure of abseiling down earlier this year for charity—dominates the local skyline. The hospital now has 670 beds, serving as the main healthcare centre and accident and emergency department for around 330,000 people. Just over 4,500 staff work around the clock to provide the best possible care to local residents. However, the hospital is hampered by its setting, on a fairly small plot of land right in the centre of the city. There is no room to expand, so the hospital really has to make the most of every spare bit of space available.

The small site of the hospital is mirrored by the limited size of the A&E department, which can safely admit around 55 people within a 24-hour period. According to hospital staff, they regularly have to deal with between 120 and 150 people daily. This is quite simply unsafe. The Minister will know that the Care Quality Commission rated the Department as “requires improvement” late last year. Understandably, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) is keen that patients from her constituency are encouraged to attend Basildon A&E instead of Southend.

Clearly, the number of people the A&E department has to deal with has consequences for treatment waiting times. Statistics last month showed that more than a third of patients needing the most serious A&E care waited more than four hours to be seen. The lack of space in the A&E wing also means that ambulances regularly have to queue up for several hours outside the hospital to discharge their patients. Indeed, it is not unusual to see what effectively amounts to a temporary field hospital of 15 ambulances in the car park.

The national guidance states that patients arriving at an accident and emergency department by ambulance must be handed over into the care of A&E staff within 15 minutes. Shockingly, the average handover time for a person arriving by ambulance at Southend Hospital is

84 minutes, which is five times the national target. The worst day at Southend this year was 11 April, when the average handover time was 178 minutes. That is nearly three hours, and 12 times the national guideline. Of course, some patients wait considerably longer. One of my constituents contacted me last month to tell me that he had spent six hours in the back of an ambulance in agony, and one 79-year-old constituent had to wait eight hours in severe pain before being seen. If this is happening in the spring and summer, I dread to think what the situation might be in winter.

This brings me to my first ask of the Minister this evening. The hospital trust, led by Anthony McKeever and the outgoing chief executive officer, Clare Panniker, has put together a plan for a major clinical reconfiguration of the Mid and South Essex integrated care system. This reconfiguration has been fully costed at £118 million and the funding was first promised in Parliament in 2017. Southend is the major beneficiary of this funding envelope, with £51 million also promised in 2017 for the development of, among other things, a new emergency care hub at Southend Hospital. This would go a long way towards addressing the critical issues with space and flow in the emergency department. It would also see additional inpatient wards and new and refurbished theatres in the hospital, as well as myriad other essential medical services.

This scheme is ready to roll, but for one big stumbling block. Approval of £8.4 million in capital enabling funding is needed to allow the development of the full business cases necessary to unlock the whole £118 million programme, and it is still awaited. In May, the Minister reconfirmed at a meeting with Essex MPs that these crucial enabling funds will be expedited. Sadly, this has not yet happened. Will he please confirm tonight the release of the £8.4 million of enabling funding needed for these essential upgrades at Southend Hospital? In the words of Cuba Gooding Jr., when will he “Show me the money”?

Problems with people waiting absurdly long times for an ambulance to arrive are not unique to Southend. This year we have already had debates in this place on delays everywhere from Cornwall to Shropshire to Ellesmere Port. One elderly woman in my constituency waited 12 hours for an ambulance to arrive after falling at home and fracturing her hip. Another 86-year-old waited six hours while suffering from sepsis.

What makes the situation in Southend unique is our rapidly ageing population. The results of the 2021 census, published last week, show that the average age in Southend is 20 years older than in England as a whole. The number of people aged 70 to 74 has risen by 37% in the past 10 years, and we now have nearly 2,000 people aged over 90. As my predecessor was so fond of saying, we have the highest concentration of centenarians in the country, which has implications for the ambulance service. Older people are more likely to have urgent medical conditions that can be dealt with only by having an ambulance come to them.

I am pleased to say that, since I was elected, we have seen some real changes. Working with my neighbouring colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point, whom I thank for being here to support me this evening, we have held many productive meetings with the new chief executive of East of England

Ambulance Service, Tom Abell, including another one only this afternoon. I am delighted that we will be receiving a net increase of 111 ambulance staff, and that the 11 new ambulances promised to us in March are already on our roads.

There will be no real benefit to the people of Southend West from these new ambulances if, when they arrive at the hospital, they cannot be discharged. The elderly lady with a broken hip I mentioned earlier, after waiting 12 hours at home for an ambulance, had to wait outside the hospital in that ambulance for another four hours. Sadly, her story is far from unique.

My second ask of the Minister this evening is exactly the same as my first. Will he release the £8.4 million of enabling funding needed to improve Southend Hospital's emergency department?

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The heroic efforts of our paramedics—I use the word heroic deliberately—are being hampered because they cannot discharge a critically ill patient into Southend Hospital if there is no bed available. An ambulance in the hospital car park with a critically ill patient cannot go back out to help other ill patients.

My hon. Friend is entirely right so, as a neighbouring MP, I join her in pleading with the Minister for this vital £8.4 million. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is also in the Chamber, I would be grateful if the Minister could show all of us the money.

Anna Firth: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. While ambulances wait in the hospital car park, another person is waiting at home with a broken hip or something similar and is unable to be picked up.

The 111 service in Mid and South Essex is run by Integrated Care 24, and the service answered 30,396 calls from patients in June. One of the most baffling things about the 111 service is that if a call has not been triaged by a clinician within an hour, an ambulance is automatically dispatched as a fail-safe. In June alone, 100 ambulances were auto-dispatched in Mid and South Essex, which is an average of 3.1 a day, due to delays in patients being triaged. In May, I met an ambulance crew who had been auto-dispatched to treat a 12-year-old child with tonsillitis as the case had not been triaged by a clinician within an hour. The ambulance crew were as surprised as the mother that they had been sent to attend a child with tonsillitis. On average, each ambulance call-out costs the taxpayer about £350. On those figures, we could be spending nearly £500,000 annually in Mid and South Essex alone on unwanted and unnecessary ambulance call-outs. Were that situation to be repeated at every hospital trust throughout the country, we would spend tens of millions of pounds on unnecessary ambulances. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the system that causes ambulances to be auto-dispatched?

Finally, I come to GP waiting times. GPs are at the heart of so much of our health system, and they have traditionally been the first port of call for people who have minor or recurring illnesses, but since the covid pandemic we have had a tsunami of complaints from people who are not able to see their GP. According to a poll by Survation, 47% of people in Southend West experienced problems booking a GP appointment in the past year—that is nearly 50% of people who are

[Anna Firth]

trying to see their GP. Every week, I am contacted by at least three constituents who are struggling to get a GP appointment. Generally, the complaint is that patients are in an endless loop of calling their practice in the morning and being told that there are no appointments available and they should call back in the afternoon, only to be told then to call again the following day—and they go round the buoy again. In one case, it took a constituent five weeks to get an appointment with his doctor. At West Road surgery, in my constituency, there are currently three-week delays for urgent blood tests. I have also received many reports of GPs delaying the return of medical forms to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and of delayed referrals to specialists. One constituent who had suffered a minor injury to his head and needed to see a GP for a check-up and bandaging had to call an ambulance and attend A&E because no appointment was available. This simply adds to the pressures I spoke about earlier in this speech.

Some surgeries in my constituency are attempting to innovate by bringing in an e-consult system, but they are doing so without writing and explaining the new system to their patients in advance—I am told there are no funds from the clinical commissioning group for such a letter. Not surprisingly, that is adding to the levels of frustration and anxiety. Besides, this online system is not suitable for many of the most elderly and vulnerable people in my constituency, who do not have access to the internet. Nationally, 54% of over-75s are not online, and the figure for the city of Southend is 8%, so we are talking about 12,000 people who have never even used the internet.

What my constituents need and deserve is to be able to visit their doctor, and that brings me to my final ask this evening. We can implement all sorts of clever systems to reduce waiting lists, but what we really need is more GPs and more appointments. Will the Minister please let me know what is being done to recruit more doctors in Southend, and what is being done to encourage them to increase the number of in-person appointments available?

I started this evening's speech on a positive note by thanking our brilliant health workers, and I want to conclude on a similar one. We have some brilliant initiatives locally that are already making people in Southend West healthier. Southend University Hospital is piloting an innovative enhanced discharge service, a collaboration between Southend-on-Sea City Council, Southend clinical commissioning group and the hospital. This is helping people to get home when they have been in hospital, and it is a brilliant therapy-led assessment service that really puts people at the heart of ongoing care. I am delighted that the Government have praised the scheme, and I look forward to it being extended. I would like to take this opportunity to invite the Minister to come and visit the hospital; he and his ministerial colleagues—whoever they may be—are always welcome to come and visit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) would raise the case for a Shoebury health centre if this debate covered the whole of Southend, but I know the Minister is already aware of his passion and support for such a proposal. I fully support this endeavour and indeed would welcome one of these in Southend West as well.

To conclude, my main asks this evening are as follows. What is being done to recruit doctors in Southend, and what is being done to encourage them to increase the number of GP appointments available? What is being done to reform the 111 service to ensure ambulances are not auto-despatched needlessly? Most importantly, will the Minister please confirm tonight the release of the £8.4 million of enabling funding that is so vitally needed to improve the Southend emergency department?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As the Minister is a regular attendee at Adjournment debates, I would normally say that I am delighted to see him here today. After the events of the last 24 hours, however, I will say that I am relieved to see that he is here to respond to this debate.

7.21 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) on securing this important debate. She is a notable advocate for healthcare in her constituency, and a strong champion and voice for her constituents in this place. The NHS has faced extraordinary pressures over the course of the pandemic, and I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our utmost gratitude to staff for their outstanding work and dedication during this time.

I will address a number of my hon. Friend's points, but, although it is rare to do so at the Dispatch Box, I will come to her main point first and seek to address it head-on. My hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)—and, although she may not intervene in the debate, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris)—have asked whether the Government will provide the £8.4 million of funding requested to improve Southend emergency department to unlock the business case to allow it to proceed to do further work. While I regret that I am not able to give a clear answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West this evening, I hope it will come as some encouragement to her that I can say that, following the tenacity of her campaigning on this issue in the Chamber, and indeed outside it, in pursuing me and other Ministers—that is exactly what Members of Parliament are here to do—I have instructed the Department to convene a meeting to review the submitted business case prior to the summer recess, and I anticipate being able to update her and the trust with the outcome of that before the House rises for the summer. That is, obviously, subject to my new Secretary of State's decision on the recommendation of officials, but I undertake that I have instructed officials to come back to her with that decision before the House rises in a couple of weeks.

In the meantime, work to improve local services continues, and I am aware that Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust hospitals and the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust—EEAST—have a range of actions in place to meet the high levels of demand they are experiencing. For example, EEAST is prioritising emergency cases, and, where clinically appropriate, a team of clinicians in its emergency clinical advice and triage service will advise people who do not need an ambulance to use other services. EEAST has also successfully recruited more call handlers and expanded the network

of hospital ambulance liaison officers who help to co-ordinate handovers at hospitals, including by diverting crews to other hospitals where they can be seen more quickly.

EEAST is working with acute hospitals to develop cohorting areas, where patients can be assessed before going into the emergency department, helping to get ambulances back on the road more quickly. In the context of ambulances, I am reminded of an incident that was recounted to me—I could not possibly reveal the source from which I acquired this information. When she was abseiling to raise money for charity while dressed as Wonder Woman, my hon. Friend spotted ambulances queued up. As soon as she got to the ground and across the car park, she pursued the issue to find out what was going on. Such is her commitment to her constituents and her passion for this issue, and I commend her for that.

After a successful trial at Lister Hospital, EEAST is now using a rapid release process with some acute hospital partners, where the handover of patients is fast tracked if an urgent response is required in the community. At busy times, EEAST may also offer enhanced pay rates to encourage staff to complete additional shifts.

These local initiatives are also supported by national actions to reduce waiting times, including continuous central monitoring, support from the National Ambulance Coordination Centre and the allocation of £150 million of additional system funding for ambulance service pressures in 2022-23, supporting improvements to response times through additional call handler recruitment, retention and other funding pressures. My hon. Friend has quite rightly highlighted the additional ambulance service staff and the additional ambulances themselves. She is absolutely right to highlight the fact that while the ambulance service may often be the visual manifestation of the challenges faced, it is a system challenge with a number of complex, interrelated parts.

My hon. Friend has raised an important issue concerning the NHS 111 service and the automatic dispatch of ambulances. I am advised that when a patient calls 111 and the automated call handler assessment concludes that a low-urgency ambulance should be dispatched, a clinician will call the patient back to validate that that is actually required. I understand that that happens about 95% of the time. Where the patient is not able to be contacted within a fixed timeframe, as my hon. Friend has said, the call will be passed to the ambulance service for dispatch. However, it is important to understand that the call may still be scrutinised by the ambulance service as to whether an ambulance is really needed.

Although no remote triage process can be perfect, there is consistent clinical review of these calls to ensure the wise use of resource, and NHSEI does not believe that significant numbers of ambulances are being dispatched unnecessarily. I have already asked officials in the Department to look into the specific issue that my hon. Friend has raised to understand the extent to which that

is happening, whether it is happening unnecessarily and what the consequences are in terms of cost and time resource.

We are also building the capacity of NHS 111 to act as the front door to the emergency care system, so that patients receive an ambulance or go to A&E only when needed. This is being supported with £50 million in 2022-23, helping to ensure that people can access urgent care when they need it, increasing the ability to book callers into alternative services or into a timed slot at their local A&E where appropriate.

On general practice, we know that general practitioners are still under huge pressure. I am incredibly grateful for the contribution of GPs and their teams over the past two years. They have stepped up to deliver our world-leading vaccination programme while still providing exemplary care for their patients during a pandemic. We made £520 million available to improve access and expand general practice capacity during the pandemic. That was in addition to at least £1.5 billion announced in 2020 to create an additional 50 million general practice appointments by 2024 by increasing and diversifying the workforce.

GPs and their teams will always be there for patients, alongside NHS 111 and community pharmacy teams, and it is important that people do not delay in coming forward with health concerns. In 2021-22, we saw the highest ever number of doctors accepting a place on GP training—a record 4,000 trainees, up from 2,671 in 2014. GP trainees support fully qualified GPs, helping to ease workloads and increase capacity, and allowing more patients to get the care they need. Just as in hospitals, doctors in training are delivering direct patient care while being safely supervised and supported.

I hope that our exchange today provides a degree of reassurance that there is significant support in place at local and national level to address performance issues, as well as a determination to improve the provision of health services in Southend West and more broadly in the local area. As you alluded to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been a regular at the Dispatch Box in these Adjournment debates, certainly over the past two to three years. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this debate, and it has been a great pleasure and privilege to answer it.

Anna Firth: May I thank the Minister very much for the careful way in which he has responded to all my points and for his assurance that there will be some news on the £8.4 million before the recess?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her kind words. I will just conclude by saying that it has been a huge privilege to respond to debates such as this, and I am very grateful to her for affording me that privilege this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 July 2022

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Ambulance and Emergency Department Waiting Times

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered waiting times for ambulances and emergency department care.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer, and I am pleased to see so many Members here to discuss the highly concerning issue of the unacceptably long waiting times patients in our constituencies endure to access emergency care.

Our urgent and emergency care system provides a vital service supporting a significant number of patients with a huge variety of medical conditions, ranging from acute emergencies and trauma to mental health crises, the care of our homeless population and care of elderly patients. Emergency care should be there for all of us when we need it. Few of us plan to attend emergency departments, but we are all potential patients.

Covid-19 has had a detrimental effect on our ambulance services. More and more people are calling ambulance services or attending A&E because they are having difficulties accessing other, more appropriate parts of our health system. National NHS performance figures illustrate that our healthcare service does not have the capacity to meet demand, and during May 2022, only 60% of patients were seen, admitted or discharged within four hours of their time of arrival. We should all be worried by those figures, which demonstrate that the health service is unable to meet the needs of patients with current levels of resource and capacity.

I want to share the example of the Royal United Hospital in my Bath constituency. It demonstrates the severity of the problem and the way in which hospitals have to step in because the Government are not willing to accept that there is a real crisis. There have been several cases in Bath in which residents waited many hours for an ambulance. Recently, an elderly man was forced to sleep on the floor of a local church as it took 12 hours for an ambulance to arrive—12 hours. A GP surgery ran out of oxygen for a patient due to the time it took for the ambulance to arrive. Ambulance handover delays are a significant patient-safety risk at the RUH, and up to 90% of the causes of delay are linked to the availability of beds in the hospital.

The RUH has consistently been running with a bed occupancy of over 90% for the past year, which is significantly impacting the hospital's ability to move patients out of the emergency department. The hospital is one of the most challenged in the south-west for "non-criteria to reside"—in other words, medically fit for discharge—patients, and NHS England is reporting that the RUH has 24.3% of its beds occupied by patients who are medically fit, which is the third highest figure in the south-west. That is driven by gaps in the domiciliary care and social care markets.

My local authority, Bath and North East Somerset Council, has been short of 1,600 hours per week, community teams are struggling to recruit and our local care group has a vacancy rate of more than 30%. The RUH is working with the council to develop its own in-house domiciliary care to try to plug the gaps, but the recruitment crisis remains acute. NHS England is assessing the trust and is trying to help to reduce the bed gap at the RUH. The hospital recently launched a "home is best" transformation programme that aims to increase the number of patients who go home instead of into a community hospital bed. Our hospitals are trying all this, yet there is a crisis. It is important that we recognise that, and that the Government recognise it and step in on behalf of the hospitals.

Our hospital in Bath is also working out ways to reduce the number of patients who need to go into the emergency departments in the first place, and has launched a same-day emergency care offer for frail patients. However, nationally, the lack of staffed beds has resulted in staggering numbers of patients waiting beyond 12 hours after the decision is made by the A&E doctor. There have been more patients waiting 12 hours or more from the decision to admit this year than there were in the entire reporting period leading up to 2022. In May, there were more than 19,000 patients waiting 12 hours or more from the decision to admit, yet research from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine shows that that number is only the tip of the iceberg. We know that far greater numbers of patients endure waits of 12 hours or more if the clock is started as soon as they set foot in A&E. Many more patients endure extremely long waits but are not captured by the current metric. We need to understand the true scale of the problem. If we do not know about the extreme delays that our patients are enduring, we cannot take action. Transparency is key, and reporting metrics from the moment of arrival at the A&E department must be the starting point.

Such delays mean that emergency services are not able to respond to 999 calls from critically ill patients. Instead, they are being held in stacks of hundreds each day, and staff are forced to prioritise among even the most serious cases. Staff have to wait with the patients in corridors, and sometimes even outside the hospital, unable to have them treated and unable to respond to new emergency calls. We must think very carefully about what that means. Behind every statistic is a patient. Those patients are stuck and have no choice but to wait for a bed to be freed up so that they can be admitted and can receive the care they need. Unfortunately, some patients end up on trolleys in crowded corridors with many other patients. We should be treating patients with dignity. We know that crowding is dangerous and is linked to avoidable harm and, in some cases, death.

The pressure that the NHS faces, which has been building over recent decades, has real detrimental consequences on the emergency medicine workforce and patients. Staff are considering reducing hours, changing careers or retiring early. Additionally, emergency staff face constant abuse from those left waiting, which is hugely distressing. The more people leave, the more pressure is created.

The Royal College of Emergency Medicine's "Retain, Recruit, Recover" report detailed findings from its survey of emergency medicine clinicians. It found that 59% of respondents experienced burnout during the second wave of the pandemic, and described their levels of

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stress and exhaustion from having worked the second wave as higher than normal. The report found that operational pressures, patient safety and staff wellbeing are intrinsically linked. In 2021, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine highlighted a UK-wide shortfall of 2,000 to 2,500 whole-time equivalent emergency medicine consultants. The needs of our population's health and wellbeing are greater now than they have ever been. We cannot afford to lose even more of the workforce at this critical time of need.

It is clear that this very serious issue is a matter of life and death for many patients. Among those who are suffering from serious but not necessarily prioritised issues, it is elderly and frail patients who are being hit the hardest. Although it is easy for the Government to point the finger at hospitals and management, it is clear that this issue needs to be addressed centrally at Government level. It is not exclusive to Bath or north Shropshire; it is a national problem, as the range of MPs in the debate demonstrates.

What is more, the consequences of a failed social care system, which does not allow for the timely discharge of patients who are medically fit to leave hospital, has resulted in further crowding and corridor care in our hospitals. The chief executive of NHS England recently acknowledged the important role that social care plays in supporting patient flow through hospitals. The Government must outline the steps they will take to ensure the social care system is adequately equipped ahead of next winter.

Last autumn, the NHS published a 10-point plan for the recovery of the urgent and emergency care system. It has no targets or timelines, and it lacks any indication of how progress will be reported. It details only how the whole system will work together to recover urgent and emergency services, focusing on immediate and medium-term activities. The plan aimed to “mitigate against the current pressures felt across systems and improve performance in all settings”—great words, but where are the outcomes? All that is happening is that the situation is getting worse.

The NHS standard contract 2022-23 was recently amended to change the way in which 12-hour waits in A&E are calculated. As a result, A&E is now collecting 12-hour data from the patient's time of arrival, not from the decision to admit. Despite that, the Government and NHS England have not indicated when the data will be publicly available. Publishing the figures nationwide will allow for transparency across the system, so perhaps the Minister will tell us when that will be publicly available. That should lead to improvements.

The Liberal Democrats have been sounding the alarm bells for months, calling for an urgent investigation into England's ambulance services and a review of ambulance station closures, but the Government keep turning a blind eye to the crisis. We are calling for more investment in local ambulance services, an urgent campaign to recruit more paramedics, and enabling trusts to restore community ambulance stations in rural areas in Devon, where waiting times are unacceptably long.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I found on the doorsteps in my part of Devon over the last month that pretty much every door I knocked on had somebody behind it with an anecdote about how ambulance waiting times had affected them personally. In south-west

England we have the longest waiting times in the country. One paramedic told me that despite his very best efforts to treat patients, there were times when he came across very undignified scenes. He talked about one example of how he came across a lady who had fallen down and had to wait 14 hours for an ambulance to arrive.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I realise that the hon. Gentleman is new, but interventions should be short and to the point. I did not want to interrupt him, but I ask him to remember that interventions should be as brief and to the point as possible.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Mr Stringer. I think every one of us has such stories from the doorstep. Almost everybody knows of a loved one or a friend who has waited an unacceptably long time. That is why it is so important that we get the urgent review that Liberal Democrats have been calling for.

We are calling for a formal inquiry. The Government need to fund thousands of extra beds to stop handover delays in A&E so that ambulances can get back on the road as soon as possible. Will the Minister comment on a formal inquiry into the crisis?

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Fifty per cent. of the entire Northern Ireland budget is spent on the health service, which is a higher proportion than in the rest of the UK. But this is not just about the money. Does the hon. Member agree that it is about how the money is spent and managed, and that that is critical to any review?

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. Not everything is always about money; it is also about proper management. At the heart of it all is transparency. We need to have the figures and to understand what the problems are. I echo the Royal College of Emergency Medicine: unless we have transparency, we cannot get to the bottom of the problem.

The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has already stated that A&E departments are not confident they will cope this winter. The Government simply cannot ignore this looming crisis on top of the existing challenges we face. They are running the NHS into the ground. With A&E wait times measured in hours instead of minutes, people are no longer confident that they can get urgent medical help when they need it. The Government need to start working with NHS staff to draw up a robust plan now to tackle the crisis in ambulance waiting times and emergency care, and start delivering. Thousands of lives depend on it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I think there are 10 hon. Members wishing to speak. I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.40 am. Therefore, Members have approximately five minutes each. I will not impose a time limit unless people abuse this privilege.

9.45 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) very much for obtaining this very important debate. The very first subject that I raised when I was a newly elected MP was the state of ambulance response times in North Norfolk.

That is a particular worry for me, because up on the North Norfolk coast I have the oldest constituency demographic in the entire country, and Wells, a beautiful seaside village, has had the very dubious honour of consecutively having the worst response times. Over the last few years, whereas the category 1 responses have flatlined, the C2 and C3 response times have got worse. Constituents are coming to me almost every other day to tell me about the appalling situation that they have encountered in calling an ambulance. The worst cases are of people having strokes in the back of their car while family members are driving them to the hospital. When we hear those accounts, we get some sense of just how bad the picture is.

I agree with many of the comments made by the hon. Member, but we have to recognise that this is not a simple issue that can be solved with a single magic bullet, and it is certainly not all the fault of the ambulance service, which is working under extreme pressure. All our health systems at the moment are really buckling under the issues that have been caused by the pandemic. That is the case in social care systems, mental health care and dentistry. There are serious problems in all places at the moment.

Let us take the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, which is my emergency department. It has the honour—I call it an honour; it is dreadful—of being the worst in the east of England. In the first 13 weeks of the year, 723 equivalent ambulance shifts were lost. The third worst performing facility for ambulance response times is the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, with 442 equivalent shifts lost. Both ED units that serve my constituency are in the top three worst facilities in the entire east of England. It is a huge problem, with hundreds upon hundreds of hours lost every single week when ambulances are queueing up outside a hospital because they cannot get patients out of the trucks and into the A&E department. Equally, the social care system is so poor that they cannot get people back into the community, with the respite that they need.

We know that there are serious issues about sickness; there are rising levels of covid. But there are other issues also. I am told that 50% of the calls that are made to the ambulance service in Norfolk are calls that simply should not have been made; they could have been for something that was not life-critical. That is coupled with ambulances pulled off the patch to go and service other areas; actually, there would be enough ambulances in North Norfolk if they were used within North Norfolk. That just adds to the problem.

However, the most pressing issue is the sheer numbers—the hundreds of hours lost every week from ambulances queueing up. The question is why, and it is a very easy answer: 95%-plus occupancy all the time is the problem. We simply cannot have the capacity in place. It is no good saying, “Well, if we just build a bigger hospital or build a bigger ED, that will solve the problem.” I do not think it will, because the problem is so multifaceted.

The hon. Member for Bath was right: transparency of data is incredibly important. But when we drill down into the information, we realise that all the issues that I have set out are working in tandem; they are all conspiring to cause the problem. In the last minute or so available to me, I want to ask what we do about it, and there are some practical suggestions that I want the Government to take really seriously.

First, the role of our community first responders should not be underestimated. We are not treating this problem seriously enough. Why on earth are we not paying community first responders, as is the case with the retained fire service? We are asking volunteers in our community, who have to be fit men and women and who, frankly, are probably not going to be people approaching their retirement age of nearly 70. Not enough people are going to be volunteering in our communities, and that is why we suffer with the numbers. If we really got some energy behind this in order to recruit these people, help them and make it economical for them to do it, we would see, I think, uptake of that. They are the first line of defence in helping to support people.

The second issue we should be looking at is rapid response vehicles. A rapid response vehicle was nearly taken away from North Norfolk, which was absolutely appalling. These vehicles offer far better economic value than ambulances. The clue is in the name—they are able to rapidly respond. They can be stationed virtually anywhere and help suffering patients while an ambulance gets to them. They are incredibly important in rural areas, so I ask the Minister to take those issues seriously.

Finally, I will be spending the first week of the forthcoming recess volunteering with the East of England Ambulance Service so that I can see at first hand the problems it faces. Those who work there are heroic people, but, my word, they need some help.

9.50 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

“24 Hours in A&E” is not just a television show, but a reality that patients across the UK now face. It is no longer a short trip to the accident and emergency department, but a short stay in an accident and emergency ward, which means staff are effectively running two wards: the A&E ward and the ward where patients should have been moved to be treated. In Bradford, the demand for urgent and emergency care outstrips the capacity of hospitals to support patients, and that reflects the reality across the country. Unsurprisingly, the waiting time for emergency services and emergency department care will vary across the country, with waiting lists in the most deprived areas having increased by more than 55% compared with 36% for the least deprived areas.

As I have previously highlighted, children in Bradford wait 800 days longer for mental health intervention. The Government keep telling us that covid-19 is to blame for the waiting time, the backlog and the lack of resources and funding, but that could not be further from the truth. In fact, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport admitted that in her attack on the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), for failing to prepare for covid.

When a stroke patient does not get the urgent support they need, that can mean further damage to their health and life-long injuries, which in turn costs the NHS more. On the subject of ambulances, a dear friend of mine who is chief executive of My Foster Family, based in my constituency and with whom I have worked a lot, suffered a stroke last week. Shadim Hussain, who is 43 years old, is in the intensive care unit as we speak and I hope he will recover, although it will no doubt take a

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long time. When there is a 45-minute wait for an ambulance, there are two victims: the person in the ambulance who is waiting to be offloaded into the hospital and the person in the community who is waiting for the ambulance to get them to hospital. Shadim Hussain was taken to hospital in a car while he was being sick and suffering from a very serious bleed to his brain.

The UK has the second lowest number of beds per 1,000 inhabitants in the EU and the third highest decline in beds per 1,000 inhabitants in the EU. When Labour left Government in 2010, there were 144,000 hospital beds available, but at present there are around 128,000 hospital beds available.

When an 18-year-old woman suffering from a mental health crisis is forced to wait eight and a half days in A&E before getting a bed in a psychiatric hospital, that also costs the NHS more, but it is not just about the cost. The NHS was set up on a moral basis to provide care for our people; it was its birthday yesterday. Instead, people wait and pray, and some go home with more injuries or trauma. According to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, whose representatives I met yesterday, the situation is 14% worse than the current statistics tell us.

However, the most recent British social attitudes survey recorded an unprecedented fall in public satisfaction with the NHS. When we left Government, we had the highest rates of satisfaction in the NHS as we had eliminated waiting times. We now have the lowest levels of satisfaction since 1997, with long waiting times at the top of the list of reasons given for dissatisfaction. That dissatisfaction is not due to the doctors, nurses, ambulance staff, receptionists or cleaners. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, the staff are often abused. The dissatisfaction is because of the lack of resource provided by the Government.

In Bradford, we have an increase in emergency department attendances, with some very busy days when we exceed 400 attendances in any given 24 hour period. Bradford Royal Infirmary is around the corner from where I live. There are currently 46 covid-positive patients in the hospital, or 1.5 wards-worth. The segregation of covid patients, elective and acute patients is impacting on the ability to place patients in the correct bed in a timely fashion, and all that exacerbates the strain on an exhausted workforce. The continued focus on the clearance of elective backlogs means that we are trying to undertake more elective procedures at the same time as dealing with all that, and there are workforce challenges associated with staff with covid infections and colleagues who have worked relentlessly through the pandemic. Despite all that, the trust continues to perform in the top quartile across a number of key metrics, including urgent, cancer and elective care.

I put on the record my thanks to all the staff, from the chief executive's team to the porters who run the hospital, not just through covid—they continue to do so—in spite of the underfunding for years and years, before we even got to the pandemic, and despite not having the right resources now. The Government clapped for the NHS workers during the pandemic, but the claps were never enough. It is now time for action, not political slogans and gestures.

9.55 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate. I will focus my comments on the work of the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust and the James Paget University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which together serve north Suffolk and east Norfolk, including the Waveney constituency.

The staff and management of both NHS trusts are under enormous pressure at the current time and are working incredibly hard to meet a challenge that is largely not of their own making. The East of England Ambulance Service has faced a number of institutional and cultural challenges over the past decade, which the current management are addressing. During that time, for the most part, it has provided the local community with a good service, although there have been three occasions when it has not done so: in 2012, when the system broke down very badly, at around Christmas time in 2017-18, when the then management failed to properly plan for seasonal pressures, and today, as it works against a very difficult backdrop.

For the week ending 26 June, the average arrival-to-handover delay at the James Paget was one hour 30 minutes. For the previous week, it was one hour four minutes. For the week before that, it was 49 minutes. The trajectory is very much upwards. The worst individual case that has been brought to my attention is a wait of 16 hours, and I am also aware of the situation with poor triaging.

Working collaboratively and in a co-ordinated way, the ambulance service and the James Paget hospital are putting in place a range of measures to relieve the pressures. The hospital has expanded its emergency department, launched a new surgical assessment unit and invested £900,000 in a new GP streaming service aimed at providing care for patients who attend A&E and who need a doctor rather than hospital treatment. For its part, the ambulance service is putting more ambulances on the road, developing co-responses with the fire services and local communities, and staffing cohorting areas at the Paget with its own HALOs—hospital ambulance liaison officers.

Those initiatives are welcome, and the two trusts should be commended for putting them in place, but they are, in many respects, a sticking plaster. They do not address the root cause of the current crisis, which is the logjam caused by the difficulty that the James Paget and other hospitals are facing in discharging patients to free up beds.

The Paget regularly has an average of 100 patients—the equivalent of four wards—who are ready for discharge, but have nowhere to go. They have opened 22 beds at the Carlton Court Hospital, a facility that the Paget now shares with the mental health trust, but there is an urgent need for more beds to be made available in the community, whether at home, or in care and nursing homes.

The problem with care at home, which in many respects is to be preferred, is that councils such as Suffolk County Council and its social services department are struggling to recruit carers and agencies to go into people's homes to look after them after they have left hospital. In the long term, there is a need for strategic workforce planning in both the health and care sectors.

In the short term, Government need to work with councils such as Suffolk, with the East of England Ambulance Service and with hospitals such as the James Paget hospital—as well as with the wider care sector—to remove the blockage that is impacting all the way along the ambulatory care pathway. I look forward to hearing from the Minister the Government's plans for doing that.

10 am

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate. On 25 May this year, the nursing director of the West Midlands Ambulance Service, Mark Docherty, said that the ambulance trust would face a “Titanic moment” and collapse entirely this summer. He gave the specific date of 17 August. Mark went on to say that patients were “dying every day” from avoidable causes created by ambulance delays. That was 42 days ago. He predicts that we now have another 42 days before the ambulance service in my community collapses.

I have had an Adjournment debate with the Minister on that subject, and a meeting with the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), yet this Government still have not got a grip on the problem. As a proud resident of North Shropshire, I was aware of our ambulance crisis before I was elected in December, and before I started campaigning in November. However, on the campaign trail, and since being elected, it has become evident that the scale of the crisis is absolutely shocking.

Just last week, I was contacted by a constituent whose 85-year-old mother, who suffers from dementia, had fallen and suffered a suspected broken hip. Her son called the ambulance, but she sat in agonising pain in their living room for 18 hours before the ambulance arrived at her home. Everyone in this Chamber will agree that this should not be happening in this country, or in this century. It is one of many stories I have received. Many other people are attended by the ambulance crew in fairly reasonable time, but then wait 12 or 13 hours in the ambulance before being transferred into the hospital.

The focus of this debate should be on solutions to the problem, but it is also crucial to understand how we got here. Ambulance service delays are a symptom of wider issues plaguing the NHS and health services across the country, and the issue of staff shortages is critical to that, as colleagues have alluded to today. So far, the Government have failed to address that. They have thrown our hard-working doctors and nurses pretty much under the bus. We are short of nurses, carers, GPs and decision-making doctors in A&E. In February, the all-party parliamentary group for rural health and care published a report concluding that the 10 million people who live in rural and coastal areas in the UK deserve better healthcare outcomes. Colleagues here representing rural constituencies know from first-hand accounts that it is not just access to healthcare that is compromised but, in the words of the APPG report,

“the very determinants of health itself.”

That is why our ambulance crisis is even worse than in some of Britain's more urban areas. Worse still, it is hidden by the published data. West Midlands Ambulance

Service reports some of the better response times in the country, but a decent outcome in Birmingham and the black country conurbation is masking a deep crisis in the countryside.

How are the hard-working professionals in our NHS to deal with another significant rise in covid admissions? They are struggling to deal with the broken social care service, a hospital bed crisis and people who cannot access a GP and so are turning up at A&E. I know those professionals have the best will in the world, but they simply cannot deal with that. That is why Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust has declared yet another critical incident this week. I have lost count of the number of times that has happened this year—I think it is the fourth or fifth—but a summer incident is unprecedented. The winter is coming at us fast, and now we need to understand what we can do to fix the problem.

We know there is no quick fix, but one thing the Government could do now to understand the problems and come up with effective recommendations is commission the Care Quality Commission to investigate delays in the ambulance service and their underlying causes. In my Adjournment debate before easter, the Minister said it was open for me, or others, to raise that with the CQC. However, they have subsequently written to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper)—the Liberal Democrat health spokesperson—to confirm that that is not the case. It is clear that while the Health Secretary has the power to commission the CQC, unfortunately I do not. Crucially, Mark Docherty, the nursing director of West Midlands Ambulance Service, has also called for the CQC to investigate the issue. I would like to take this opportunity to urge the newly appointed Health Secretary to commission the CQC to conduct an investigation to identify the measurable actions we need to take to resolve the issues that we face across the country.

The Government could also adopt the recommendations of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans by commissioning ambulance waiting times by postcode, so that we can direct the resource where it is needed and not just over large regions. They could also act on the recommendations of the APPG's February report to deal with the health inequalities faced by the one fifth of our population who live living in rural or coastal communities. There are positive steps that can be taken to fix this crisis. I would like the Minister to say exactly what is going to happen now.

10.5 am

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I start by thanking all our NHS and care workers, who do an incredible job every day in dealing with the huge pressures on our local health services.

As I have said on a number of occasions, we are seeing significant challenges in north Staffordshire with ambulance delays and demand at the Royal Stoke A&E. Many of my constituents have contacted me after waiting for many hours for an ambulance. I have had to intervene on more than one occasion to get West Midlands Ambulance Service to respond to patients who have waited for 12 hours or more.

It is totally unacceptable for elderly and vulnerable people to be left to suffer without the emergency response that they need. Ambulances are now frequently queuing

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up outside the Royal Stoke A&E due to the lack of space to admit people. Our experience is similar to that of many other Members, with occupancy levels in the Royal Stoke hospital at over 90% much of the time. Despite the efforts to increase flow through the hospital, we still see too many patients fit for discharge not being able to be discharged, due to the lack of social care beds or not having care packages in place.

The availability of social care places across Staffordshire has continued to be significantly affected by covid, with homes locked down to new admissions, and a number of places have been lost due to quality and staffing issues. Our health and care services are still being impacted by the effects of the pandemic, and work to recover them from the pandemic is ongoing. What is clear is that these pressures cannot be sustained and that the situation must improve, but there are multiple causes that cannot simply be fixed overnight. Many of the pressures in the local health care system predate the pandemic. These relate to the period when the new private finance initiative hospital was built by the last Labour Government. That hospital has fewer beds and faces more demand following the Stafford Hospital scandal—also under Labour's watch—as well as the amalgamation of Staffordshire Ambulance Service into West Midlands Ambulance Service.

We must address some of these deep-seated challenges. I commend the Government's work to invest £36 billion in our NHS and care services, which are record levels of Government investment. However, this is not just about more money. We will not put our health and care services on a sustainable path by just pumping in more money. We must also use the opportunity that this investment provides to fix some of the wider systemic problems.

One of my constituents who is a student paramedic contacted me this week. He described the huge overcrowding at the Royal Stoke A&E and on occasions having to spend his whole 12-hour shift with frail, elderly and vulnerable patients just waiting outside A&E to be admitted. He hits the nail on the head when he said that many are turning to A&E and calling ambulances due to failures to properly manage their conditions in the community, with the challenges of accessing primary care. Accessing primary care and GP services are all too common problems, with people needing to resort to far more costly acute and secondary care.

I do not doubt that many working in primary care are equally overloaded and are doing their best to support patients, but primary care services need to be prioritised more. Access to primary care in our communities needs to be improved, as this is the route to greater prevention and earlier intervention to reduce some of the demands on the wider healthcare system. I very much support the improvements that the Government are making through the Health and Care Act 2022, which will help to better integrate healthcare services with integrated healthcare systems, which went live from the start of this month. I hope that the key focus of our ICS in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire will be on better integrating primary, secondary and social care, so that we develop a more patient-focused service. That requires all healthcare partners, and partners more broadly, to work together. We must see greater collaboration to help to address some of these challenges.

Key to reducing demand will be greater prevention and early intervention, whether in physical or mental health. This will also very much rely on communities and the charitable third sector, which have much to give when it comes to prevention of illness and improving quality of life. Pharmacies can also do more, and I was pleased to attend the event in Parliament just down the corridor from here yesterday to support pharmacies. As the Minister knows, I have also raised before the keenness of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service to do more to help West Midlands Ambulance Service out. It has first-aid trained professionals; indeed, those professionals are already responding to more minor emergencies in some parts of the country when demand on the ambulance service is high.

For north Staffordshire, it is also particularly vital that we see the delivery of the four proposed integrated care hubs, especially the one in Longton in my constituency, completing the second phase of the new Longton primary care centre. These will bring together healthcare services and significantly improve access to NHS and care services right at the centre of the community. We have been talking about those improvements and going through consultation after consultation for far too long. We need to get on and deliver them. I very much hope the new community diagnostic hub will also be located on the site in Longton in a new, purpose-built facility.

Overall, what is most important is that we continue to support the NHS and care workforce and ensure the necessary investment that the Government have committed so that we see more of those doctors and nurses directed straight on to the frontline. I will continue to support our local NHS system in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

10.10 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate, which we all, across the House, recognise is needed, as are the solutions.

The issues in York are no different from those that I have heard about today from Members of all parties. We know the diagnosis of what is wrong: we do not have the staffing or the capacity and our hospitals are running hot the whole time. In York, we have been in OPEL 4—that is the operational pressures escalation level—for a considerable amount of time. We are all wrestling with sufficiency in the ambulance service.

The statistics I have heard this morning map on to many of the statistics in York. In May, handover took more than an hour in 752 cases—24.6% of arrivals—and then there are the trolley waits for hours on end. The mean waiting time for non-admitted patients was four hours and 18 minutes in A&E, while for admissions it was nine hours and 22 minutes. There are then the challenges on the wards as patients progress through their journey. We know that there are challenges across the system, but receiving timely emergency care is the most important thing and what we are focusing on today.

Before proposing a couple of solutions to the Minister, I want to reflect on the impact that this situation is having on staffing. We have heard about the need for a workforce plan, which is crucial, but retaining staff is important too. Many people are leaving because the pressures are bearing too heavily on them. Working

long hours is one thing—it is almost a social contract that people have to acknowledge, wrongly, I say, as part of working in the service, in either an emergency department or an ambulance service—but on top of that there is the trauma that people face. We cannot describe the impact that has on individuals.

What hurts the most is hearing the radio and knowing that there is another call, another person, another life that could be saved, but being tied down and unable to reach that call, or turning up incredibly late to see a patient, knowing that the life chances of that person in your hands have been changed because of the minutes or even hours of delay. Those are the pressures that bear down on our incredible NHS staff, making the job intolerable and eventually breaking them.

We have to look specifically at what we are doing for staff so that they can carry on with their jobs. Some 69% of emergency responders said that their mental health deteriorated during the pandemic, while just 26% described their mental health as good or very good. We know about the impact this situation is having on people day in, day out, while working those long hours. It is unsustainable. We are seeing that in the retention rates. My plea to the Minister is to introduce a good mental health support programme for staff to maintain that sufficiency. That means fixing the system as well; we cannot have one without the other.

I want to pick up on something I am very mindful of, having spent time talking to paramedics. A constituent contacted me about the poor mental health of their patients, its increased acuity and the impact of that on the service. I have met a group of campaigners who are calling for a specific mental health service with a specific phone number—instead of people having to call 999 or 111—through which people can be triaged by mental health experts and put in the right place in the service. It is about building a proper acute mental health service around people, because A&E may not be the right place for them, yet where else can we take them? It is important not only to look at the whole clinical pathway for people in crisis but to ensure that paramedics can focus on and spend their time on people with acute physical illness. I would like the Minister to reflect on the opportunity that that could bring.

In the short amount of time I have left, I want to touch on an issue in Germany, where they are doing medical thrombectomies in ambulances at the side of the road, as opposed to losing precious time taking people to A&E departments. We can do a lot more to reformulate the way our acute services work to take medicine to the patient, as opposed to taking the patient to hospital. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is nodding, so I will stop there but I look forward to his response.

10.16 am

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing a debate that, as a number of speakers have said, affects politicians of whatever party right across the country. I am lucky enough to represent a Norfolk seat, so my Broadland constituency is served by the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital and, to a slightly lesser extent, by the James Paget Hospital and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. All three have been mentioned in the debate.

The problems for ambulance waiting times are multifaceted and have been well rehearsed by other speakers, so I will not go through them all. I will focus on one area: hospital handover delays. The national standard is that handover should take no longer than 15 minutes, but 60% of all handovers nationally fail to meet that standard. I will focus on the Norfolk and Norwich, the most recent statistics for which show that in June the average handover time was not 15 minutes or less, but 57 minutes—almost an hour.

When we look at ambulance times, we think it is surely the front door of the hospital that is the problem—getting people into A&E—but when I spoke to the leadership of the Norfolk and Norwich, they told me that it is overwhelmingly the back door that is the problem, by which I mean people leaving the hospital. People are medically fit to be discharged but there are not appropriate intermediate care spaces for them to be discharged into, or their care packages have not been agreed or put in place. We should focus on that more than any of the other important aspects.

If we look at the data, we see that in April this year, across the nation, 20,155 people who were medically fit for discharge were still retained in hospital beds. During the covid pandemic I learned that we have around 100,000 beds in the NHS. More than 20,000 of them are bed-blocked—a deeply unfair term because it implies that the people in the beds are refusing to leave when, of course, nothing could be further from the truth—which means that fully a fifth of hospital beds are out of use for no medical reason. That is crucial to solving this problem. How many extra hospitals that we are building is equivalent to those 20,000 beds? It is an enormous change.

We need to look at why medically fit patients are not being discharged. In my submission, a key reason is the disparity of funding and where funding comes from in respect of the move from NHS beds to care. Everyone in this room knows that one provision is funded by the NHS and the other by county councils. There is often an unedifying dispute about who should pick up the bill and how to transfer responsibility for a patient, so there is no such thing as continuity of care in the discharge process.

If we can do one thing radically to improve not only ambulance times but the service that is provided in our hospitals more generally, as well as act on the burnout that hon. Members have described—the pressures on staff and the number of staff required—it is to solve the problem of continuity of care between the back door of the hospital and the front door of intermediate care and care in the community.

My question to the Minister is: am I wrong in that basic analysis? If I am, perhaps he will tell me where I have gone wrong. If I am right, or even substantially right, I would be grateful if he set out his views on how we could take the bold step from siloed funding and responsibility between the NHS and secondary care to the transition to what we desperately need, which is continuity of care for the patient, thereby solving all the other problems we are discussing today.

10.21 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Stringer. Like everybody else, I thank the hon. Member for Bath

[Mike Amesbury]

(Wera Hobhouse) for her insightful contribution to the debate, which is giving us the opportunity to speak as we celebrate this very week the 74th birthday of the NHS.

The NHS was founded by a Labour Government to provide healthcare for all, free at the point of delivery, and it has been a life saver and a life changer—a marvel to this day throughout the world. Another Labour Government in 2010, which is some time ago now, left the NHS with the lowest waiting lists on record, reduced waiting times and the highest satisfaction rating in history.

What have we got now, 12 years later, in the dying days or dying weeks of this Conservative Government? We have an NHS and a care system cut back to the bone—well before covid, which has been referred to. That has left, in particular, elderly and disabled people without the care they have needed. That has been reflected in today's debate, from all sides of the House.

We have a workforce crisis that has left the NHS with a shortage of 94,000 staff. There is a lack of beds caused by about 400,000 patients a month being unable to leave hospital because of care shortages, which have been acknowledged and debated here today. The social care precept, which the Minister might refer to, is nowhere near sufficient. He would probably agree with that, if he decided to leave his post in the not-too-distant future. That is a decision for him to make.

Nye Bevan will be turning in his grave at this crisis, which is perhaps most apparent when we look at emergency care provision. As is the case in the rest of the country, the North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust is missing ambulance response targets by a country mile. For the most serious cases, in which there is an imminent risk to life, average response times are almost two minutes over target.

Category 2 cases are not the highest category of emergency response, but they include people who are having a stroke or a heart attack, or who are suffering from major burns or sepsis. Such cases should be responded to in 18 minutes on average, and 90% of calls should be responded to within 40 minutes, but last year, the service took, on average, 48 minutes to respond to a category 2 call, and responded to 90% of incidents within an hour and 45 minutes. That is 150% longer than it should have taken, and 10 minutes more than the national average.

It is so obvious that it should not need pointing out, but when it comes to strokes and heart attacks, every minute counts. The difference between 18 minutes and 48 minutes absolutely can mean the difference between life and death.

For cases considered less serious than the two higher categories—but still urgent—the targets state that 90% of the time ambulances should arrive within two hours. Instead, in the north-west, nine out of 10 times people can expect to see an ambulance within seven hours and 15 minutes. It is not hard to imagine how, within seven hours, an urgent case can become incredibly serious.

Non-urgent cases fair even worse. In the north-west the 90% target is missed by seven hours, meaning that some people who still need hospital treatment will be waiting 10 hours to get help. Just last year one of my constituents, Jim Rotherham, who is a veteran and 89 years of age, fell at home and broke his hip. He waited

seven hours on the floor in utter agony for an ambulance. While that complaint was still live, weeks later, Jim fell again and had yet another long wait. It is simply not good enough, and I know that feeling will be shared across the House.

I am hugely grateful to everyone in my constituency, and indeed across the region, who works as a call handler, paramedic, doctor or nurse. They are working tirelessly, under pressure, but not with the resources they need, either for their own health and safety or for the health and safety of those they serve. They are being put in an impossible situation, they do not have the resources they need and the Government simply are not governing at the moment.

Some 40% of patients in my constituency covered by the Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust now face a wait greater than four hours to be seen in A&E, as do 30% covered by the Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Trust. A Halton resident, Josh, told me that it is impossible to see a doctor. That situation pushes people to urgent care centres, which he tried. He was told that he could not be seen by urgent care because there was not a doctor. He went along to A&E, but he could not be seen by A&E. The situation is putting pressure on beds, more pressure on ambulances, and really is risking lives.

Two days ago, the Warrington and Halton trust alerted the public to the fact that Warrington A&E was exceptionally busy and asked people to keep the service clear for the critically injured or sick. It is a story we have heard from many Members today and that we see in the media every single day.

On the 74th anniversary of the introduction of the NHS, let us hear it from the Government—let us hear it from the Minister, while he is still in his place: how are they going to relentlessly bring those waiting times down? How will they ensure that we have sufficient GPs trained, and staff training to support GP practices? After 12 years of the Conservatives in power, we need a national care service that is properly resourced.

10.28 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate and on her speech. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine put out a press release today saying that their new survey found that:

“Two-thirds of A&E clinical leads...are not at all confident that their organisation will cope this winter”.

Its president, Dr Katherine Henderson, said:

“This is the height of summer and yet we are seeing a state of affairs that we'd be dismayed by even in the depths of winter.”

In the north-west, the average ambulance response time for a category 1 call was eight minutes in May—better than the national average, but still a minute above the average response time target of seven minutes. The average response time for a category 2 call was around 34 minutes—again, better than the national average, but well over the target of 18 minutes. We all know that, in an emergency, every minute counts.

We all want to be confident that a well-resourced ambulance service is there should we need it, along with a properly staffed and resourced A&E department.

We are aware, too, that the ambulance services and A&E are under immense pressure—because of covid, but also because of staff shortages in the NHS. There are shortages in hospitals, making it more challenging to transfer patients to hospital beds in a timely manner, and in general practice, meaning that people are going to A&E out of frustration at their inability to secure a GP appointment. Of course, that all impacts on patients, sometimes with devastating consequences for them and their families. I want to highlight the tragic case of Sheila, the 72-year-old mother of my constituent, Shirley. I thank Shirley for sharing this information with us. Sheila suffered a heart attack and passed away at home on 1 December 2021. When she began gasping for breath two days after she had been diagnosed with a chest infection, her son called 999. There were two points of failure within the service. First, the ambulance did not arrive within the target time for a category 2 call. Secondly, when Sheila's son rang 999 for a second time, the call was kept in category 2, instead of being moved to category 1 by the emergency medical dispatcher who took the call, despite the fact that Sheila had asthma and could be heard in the background saying that she could not breathe. Tragically, 106 minutes after the first 999 call and 79 minutes after the second, Sheila's son made a third call to explain that his mother had passed away approximately 40 minutes earlier.

The findings of the serious incident investigation lay bare some of the pressures on ambulance services. It found that the main contributory factors of the delay while the call remained category 2 were the ambulance trust's capacity not meeting demand, and the effect that hospital turnaround delays had on its ability to respond to patients. The investigation also pointed out that, even with 100% funded operational staffing, the trust had not been able to meet targets.

The investigation into Sheila's case also raised the issue of the training of those taking the calls, who are known as emergency medical dispatchers. As I mentioned, the emergency medical dispatcher taking the second call missed hearing Sheila say that she could not breathe, so did not change her case to category 1, which would have resulted in an ambulance being dispatched more quickly. The investigation reported that the emergency medical dispatcher noted that the call was taken not long after she had finished her mentoring, and she was still unsure about ineffective breathing. She also advised that at the time of the call she felt that there were mixed messages from supervisors and other staff on ineffective breathing, and that it was not very clear, hence she misjudged the call.

That raises important questions about the training that emergency medical dispatchers receive. Are they getting the right kind of training? Is it being delivered in a way that allows them to express themselves if they are not sure about something? Do they receive sufficient support in the workplace? They carry out an incredibly important role, which doubtless can be extremely difficult, and comes with enormous responsibility. My constituent Shirley said:

"We did not blame the paramedics or the centre staff, but understand how short staffed and underfunded the service was, and how much strain the service was under."

I hope the Minister will respond to the issues raised in this debate with care and a commitment to improve the situation rapidly. The Government must do their

first duty—namely, to keep their citizens safe. Right now, as they fail to tackle ambulance and A&E waiting times and NHS staff shortages, they are failing badly.

10.32 am

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate.

In the north-east, as across the UK, our healthcare system is in crisis. We have an NHS staffing crisis and a lack of GPs, millions waiting for routine operations, a loss of hospital beds, and direct cuts to mental health services funding. The Health and Care Act 2022, which came into force this month, fails to address the serious challenges facing the NHS and public health and social care, and will likely make all the problems worse as local boards will make decisions based on financial constraints, rather than patient health.

The North East Ambulance Service claims to be one of the best performing in the UK on ambulance waiting times, but that ignores the unacceptable waiting times that individuals face even in the most serious cases. Ten per cent. of people who had emergencies such as strokes or serious chest pain were left waiting for 40 minutes—more than double the target wait time—and some waited for more than 90 minutes. Shockingly, 10% of individuals with urgent conditions who needed treatment and transfer to hospital waited more than three hours, and some waited as long as five hours.

Disgracefully, just a few weeks ago, reports emerged of a cover-up in the North East Ambulance Service regarding patient safety and possible deaths. There were allegations that the service withheld details from coroners in more than 90 cases between 2018 and 2019. My constituency of Jarrow is covered by the North East Ambulance Service, and such reports are obviously very concerning.

NHS England is now investigating the tragic failings of NEAS, but it is clear for everyone to see that our NHS is at crisis point. That is not the fault of individual staff members who do their best to cope with an under-resourced and understaffed NHS; nor is it just the impact of the pandemic. For too long our NHS has been pushed to the brink by the Tories. We entered the pandemic with the longest financial squeeze in NHS history, with thousands waiting longer for cancer treatment and the A&E target not met for six years. A&E waiting times are at an all-time high with 30% of people waiting more than four hours in A&E. Those waiting times have become progressively worse over the last decade.

The South Tyneside and Sunderland trust in my constituency has 39% of people waiting longer than four hours to be seen. Our emergency services are there for us in times of crisis, making life and death decisions in an instant and providing care and comfort to us at our moment of need. They need our support and they need the Government to start investing directly in our NHS. I want to put on the record my thanks for the great work that the Save South Tyneside Hospital campaign is doing in its campaign for the future of South Tyneside Hospital and its acute and emergency services.

Instead of investing in our NHS and staff, the Government insist that staff take a real-terms pay cut and attack staff sick pay, at the same time privatising as much as they can get their grubby little hands on. Our

[Kate Osborne]

NHS cannot sustain the current level of attacks from this Government. Inevitably, both staff and patients will suffer. It is a disgrace that the Government are attacking the workers who have kept us going through covid—the workers who put themselves at risk every day and who go to work to protect us, who are called heroes one minute and vilified the next.

More and more is being outsourced to private companies using a false narrative of bringing down waiting times. The more the private sector becomes involved, the worse the situation becomes as capacity in the NHS is reduced and private companies cherry-pick easy and lucrative cases. All of that has the devastating consequence of forcing more and more people in pain and desperation to take out loans and crowdfund on the internet to pay for an operation because the wait is too much for them to bear. A two-tier health system is being privatised by the back door.

It was the NHS's 74th birthday yesterday. Nye Bevan said:

"Illness is neither an indulgence for which people have to pay, nor an offence for which they should be penalised, but a misfortune, the cost of which should be shared by the community."

If we want to make sure that future generations do not have to pay when they are ill, we must urgently ensure that our NHS is funded, and that all the parts that have been privatised are brought back in-house.

10.38 am

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to listen to this very well-informed debate. I commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing it and on highlighting this important issue. We share boundaries across the south-west. I also thank the Minister for staying in the Chamber for the entire debate. He is now free to use his time. We will all be with him.

We know that under this Government record numbers of people are waiting for care, and they are waiting longer than ever before. Waiting times for ambulance and emergency department care are a symptom, as we have heard this morning, of the problems across the entire health and social care system. A record six million people are waiting for NHS treatment. There is a shortage of 100,000 staff and 17,000 fewer beds. That is not due to the pandemic, but deliberate underfunding of the NHS by a government who themselves admit—as the Culture Secretary recently did—that a decade of Conservative mismanagement had left our NHS "wanting and inadequate" even before covid hit.

I welcome the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) to his place and commend him on the points that he made. As we all know, on the doorstep, waiting times matter to constituents—a point that he made eloquently.

Waiting times for emergency care are nothing short of shocking. Like many Members of Parliament, I hear that every day from constituents. It is very distressing—and dangerous. There are cases of people waiting in agony outside the emergency department in an ambulance for over four hours, and waiting in the road for an ambulance for more than five hours. The average response time for an ambulance call-out for a stroke or suspected heart attack is 51 minutes and 22 seconds. The target, introduced

by the last Labour Government, is 18 minutes. In May 2022, more than 19,000 patients were reported by NHS England as having spent more than 12 hours from the decision to admit to their admission to hospital. That really is a damning indictment. This winter, 89.8% more ambulances than the previous year were subject to delays of more than 30 minutes or more. My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) told us of the shocking incidents in the North East Ambulance Service and the investigation.

I could go on. What I am really interested in is the solution to this appalling state of affairs, as many hon. Members have said this morning. In fact, many hon. Members, particularly those on the Government side, have written my speech for me. Our highly skilled emergency department staff and paramedics show incredible courage and quick thinking on a daily basis. They need our support and they need a proper workforce plan that addresses shortages not only in emergency care but across the whole NHS.

Alarmingly, the Government's manifesto commitment to improve waiting times for emergency departments was downgraded in the mandate from the Department of Health and Social Care to the NHS. The aim is now to improve performance "as conditions allow". Under this Government, that will be never.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) raised the case of the West Midlands Ambulance Service predicting a date on which it felt it would not be able to cope. This is not just about funding; it is also about the incoherent policies that leave patients and the public perplexed—a point that was touched on by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). Most urgent care takes place outside hospitals, but the complex mix of 111, GP out-of-hours, minor injuries units, walk-in centres, urgent care centres, as well as the plethora of online advice, is part of the chaos of fragmentation caused mostly by the now-discredited fetish for outsourcing and competition.

Currently, as we heard from the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), schemes such as HALOs—hospital ambulance liaison officers—are just a sticking plaster. If we look at this as an A&E problem or just an acute hospital problem and do not incentivise all the ambulance services and primary care bits of the system to work together, we will not address the demand, which is a point made by the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew). The incentives, particularly after the Health and Social Care Act 2012, really do not help.

We need to make it simple for patients and their families to access the right care in the right place. That means supporting primary and community care, as well as ambulance services. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, it is about bringing medical care to where people are and not expecting them to keep moving into the system.

Our highly skilled emergency teams must be free to manage all but the really serious acute cases referred to them, and then some of the problems would lessen, but the crux of the matter is that unless we improve discharges from hospital—as all hon. Members have said this morning—and ensure that our social care system is fit for purpose, we will not resolve the issue at the front of the hospital and we will not be helping patients. The pressures in leaving hospital has a direct impact on waiting times in emergency departments, and they put staff under pressure and patients in danger.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, the Government's so-called fix for social care is not a fix at all. It is due to start in 2023. We need action now. We need to increase capacity in social care, improve pay and conditions for staff and ensure that we have a sustainable, working care system that will alleviate the pressures on the NHS, as well as support our constituents. There is no quick fix, but if the Government are serious about improving waiting times, they must look at the whole system.

We know the serious harm that waits and crowding in emergency departments have on patients and staff. Crowding is undignified and inhumane for patients who are left waiting for treatment in precarious circumstances. As well as impairing the efficiency of hospitals, it contributes to staff burnout, morale injury and the loss of emergency care professionals. It is associated with increased mortality and increased length of hospital stay.

Last year, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine estimated that crowding was potentially associated with more than 4,500 excess deaths. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) noted the Royal College's point that we are in the summer. This is not the critical time. We will go into another winter—winter follows summer every year, but it seems to be a shock to the Government. This is a very serious problem.

To prevent delays, I would welcome the Minister's commitment to primary and community care and to supporting the timely discharge of patients when their hospital care is complete. Does he agree that there is an urgent need to support the social care workforce to ensure that it can offer the provision that meets the needs of our growing and ageing population? Will the Minister commit to the safe staffing of our emergency departments?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask that he leaves two minutes at the end for the proposer of the debate to wind up. I call Edward Argar.

10.44 am

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I am happy to do so, Mr Stringer.

It is a pleasure to be here on the Front Bench responding to this very important debate. If I am still in this role on Sunday, I think I will be the third longest-serving Minister for Health since 1970, which says something about either longevity or churn in this role. It is a genuine pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and I congratulate her on securing this debate.

As hon. Members across the House have acknowledged, the NHS has faced extraordinary pressures over the course of the pandemic and continues to face them. Although I suspect that not everything I say will meet with agreement from Members from both sides of the House, I join them in expressing our gratitude to all those who work not just in our NHS and health services but in social care.

I will start with a couple of words of caution about the use of history and statistics. Hon. Members made a number of points. I have been doing this job for almost three years, and I have often found that assertions are made with statistics or other facts from the history of

the NHS, and I want to provide a counter-narrative to three or four before turning to the specifics of the hon. Lady's debate.

First, I urge a little caution from Opposition Members when raising bed closures, not least because between 1997 and 2007, about 32,000 beds in the NHS were closed, which is more than double the number that were closed between 2010 and now. I say that simply to caution hon. Members that statistics can be used in different ways. There has been a long-term trend under Governments of both parties as the nature of care has changed.

Karin Smyth: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I just want to make a few more points, and then of course I will give way to the shadow Minister. She and I spent many happy hours in the Health and Care Bill Committee over many days.

On engagement with the private sector, again I would urge a little caution. It was of course the Labour Government in 2004 who first introduced the private sector into the provision of frontline clinical services with the out-of-hours contract. A Nuffield Trust blog in 2019 highlighted the fact that the increase in the use of the private sector in the NHS began before 2010 under that Government. I do not think the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) was asserting anything other than that, but it is important that I put that on the record.

Of course resources are hugely important. One of the first pieces of legislation that we introduced following the 2019 general election was the NHS Funding Act 2020, which will increase funding by £33.9 billion—a record amount—by 2023-24. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) would expect me to say, we introduced the health and care levy to bring more funding into our NHS and social care. It was disappointing that Opposition Members voted against additional funding for the NHS when that was put to a vote.

Karin Smyth: The Minister talks about the bed reduction, but that was in the context of massively increasing primary and community care, and the private sector capacity was brought in to reverse the horrendous waiting lists following 18 years of Conservative government. We decided to govern. The point that hon. Members are making is: why does the Minister not govern?

Edward Argar: That is exactly what we are doing: we are leading and putting forward measures. Disappointingly, Labour voted against that extra funding.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I just want to finish this point, but I will give way to the hon. Lady because it is her debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and others are right in their analysis that this is about patient flows. It is about a whole-system approach and the challenges across the system. My hon. Friend asked what the solution is to making the join-up work better. A key element of the solution is the new integrated care boards and integrated care systems, which genuinely seek to bridge the gap between two parts of the system, to which the hon. Member for Bath—health and social care. They both have, for want of a better way of putting it, different DNA. The NHS, since the legislation

[*Edward Argar*]

in 1946 and its implementation in 1948, has been essentially a vertical system, whereas we have retained local care by local councils on a social care level. This is an attempt to integrate them far more effectively.

Wera Hobhouse: It is not very helpful that we are entering into a party political ding-dong. There is a crisis, and we owe it to our constituents to face it. We are asking the Government, who are in charge, to do something about it.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but when hon. Members raise party political points, it is incumbent on me as Minister to respond and to put the facts on the record. I will turn to the specific points she has raised. I will also turn, in that context, to the various points that she and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) made about various tangible suggestions from the Liberals on the issue.

The hon. Member for Bath is right to have secured and introduced the debate, because this issue is one of growing concern, understandably, and not just for all our constituents but for those who work on the frontline of our NHS. I think it was the hon. Member for Weaver Vale who highlighted the challenges faced by those staff, who want to be there and want to help. When someone rings for an ambulance, it is not a case of making an appointment with their GP; they are deeply concerned for their health, or the health of someone else, in an emergency. All those staff want to do—I have met many of them—is be there for those people, and the hon. Gentleman was right to highlight that issue.

As the hon. Member for Bath will be aware, the pandemic has caused significant strain across the NHS and the social care sector, and emergency care performance, as hon. Members have been open in acknowledging, is recognised as a whole-system issue. The challenges in performance can be traced along the entire patient pathway. Indeed, as I think the hon. Lady acknowledged in her Adjournment debate in the main Chamber on 31 March, although there are elements of that that we need to look at, we also need to look at the issue as a whole. She was right to say that.

For example, as hon. Members have said, the problems and delays in discharging patients home or to community services once they have recovered have a genuine impact on hospital bed occupancy—taking up beds that could otherwise be used by patients who need them. I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland a slightly more optimistic picture, which is in no way to diminish the challenge that remains. The number of beds taken up by people who are clinically fit to be discharged is not 20,000; it hovers at around 10,000. We have set up a national discharge taskforce, which is working actively with trusts and across local systems, particularly those that are most challenged, to support that discharge work. The situation is not as acute as he suggested, but it remains challenging because every one of those beds could be used to admit patients from an urgent and emergency care setting, or indeed to tackle elective backlogs and waiting lists.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I would like to make a little progress before giving way again. I am conscious that I need to leave enough time for the hon. Member for Bath to respond.

That affects how quickly patients can be admitted from A&E, and such delays increase waiting times, as has been said, and lead to that crowding in departments, which has an impact on how quickly new patients arriving in A&E can be seen and treated, including those arriving by ambulance. When this causes ambulance queues to form, the local ambulance resource available to be dispatched to incoming 999 calls is reduced. It is fair to say that although the ambulance queues and delays are often the most visible manifestation of challenge, they are in many ways a symptom of that broader patient flow and the systemic challenge we face.

The root cause of these issues is hospital bed occupancy. That has consistently remained nationally at around 93%—a level usually seen only during winter pressures, as hon. Members have said. The pandemic has played a significant part in driving those pressures, and there are nearly 9,500 in-patients either with covid or for covid in clinical settings, as of 1 July. That is about 10% of all general and acute beds in the NHS.

Margaret Greenwood *rose—*

Edward Argar: I will give way to the hon. Lady, but I want to make a little progress. There are points I want to make before I run out of time, but then I will give way.

That number, as we know, has frequently been higher during the pandemic, and there is the challenge of staff absences during waves.

Margaret Greenwood *rose—*

Edward Argar: If the hon. Lady is brief, I will of course give way.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister will be aware that I have expressed extreme concern and tabled written questions about what happens to those people who are discharged under what was known as discharge to assess and their clinical outcomes. Will he commit to carrying out a review of the patient outcomes of all the patients discharged in that way, to see how many were readmitted to hospital within 30 days of discharge?

Edward Argar: I will not commit myself to what the hon. Lady specifically asks for because of the challenge of data collection, but I will say that I see where she is coming from and appreciate the underlying point, which is about understanding the impact of the policy. It has been in use since 2020 as a pandemic measure and is now in statute. The NHS will be monitoring it carefully. We do not agree on everything, but I am always happy to talk to her about these matters because she takes a close interest in them.

With regard to local actions in the patch covered by the hon. Member for Bath, as an illustration of the sorts of measures being put in place across the country, the local integrated care system is working to improve patient flow and reduce handover delays at acute trusts, including the Royal United Hospital in Bath. I join her in paying tribute to the work that her local team there are doing. That hospital is working well with community partners to help patients to return home as soon as they

are well. That includes work with the hon. Lady's local council to develop its domiciliary care provider, which will provide an additional 1,000 hours of domiciliary care a week. A £2 million investment will also be made in the Home First programme, whereby experts from across health and care help patients to get safely back home as soon as possible. The system is also working on opening an additional 20 beds at St Martin's Community Hospital, while also developing same-day emergency care for frailty to avoid unnecessary admissions to hospital and to care for patients safely in the community.

There is of course nationally a wide range of support in place to improve urgent and emergency care more widely. That includes growing the number of call handlers for 999 and 111, and the investment that we have seen going into our ambulance services and A&Es. It is the case that £450 million of capital investment has already gone into increasing capacity in urgent and emergency care departments. In addition, we have kept, I think, over 155 more ambulances on the road over winter with our investment of £55 million more going into ambulance services. We are investing those resources in the frontline. If I recall my statistics correctly, there has been a 38% increase in the paramedic and ambulance workforce since 2010. The hon. Lady and her party can rightly claim a degree of credit for that, because a degree of that took place between 2010 and 2015. We do continue to grow the workforce.

Turning to workforce issues more broadly, it is absolutely right that, as well as providing the support to which the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) alluded—mental health and physical support for the workforce—we continue to grow the workforce in order to ease the workload pressures. We have already witnessed over 30,000 more nurses in the NHS since that pledge was made in 2019. We continue to grow all workforces. In section 41 of the Health and Care Act 2022 we set out a very clear duty on the Secretary of State in relation to workforce planning, and that work is already under way.

I will turn to a couple of further points very briefly, because I want to give the hon. Member for Bath her two minutes at the end. She raised a number of specific

points. She called for greater resources to be put in. That has been done. She called for an increase to be made in paramedics and ambulance staff. That has been and continues to be done. None of these are completed works, but they continue to be done. She called for action to stop ambulance station closures or community ambulance station closures. I have to say that those decisions are made clinically by local trusts; the power was not there for the Secretary of State to intervene. In fact, it was the Labour party that argued against giving the Secretary of State and Ministers the power to take action on those things when it voted against and spoke against that measure during the passage of the Health and Care Bill. It is right that clinicians determine what is the best set-up for clinical services in their area. I just gently make that point.

In summary, I think that both sides of the House recognise fully the challenges faced in these unprecedented times by our urgent and emergency care sector, and particularly by patients and those who work in the sector. We have a plan to fix it. We continue to invest in that plan and to support our workforce, and we will continue to do that for the benefit of patients.

10.58 am

Wera Hobhouse: I thank everybody who have taken part in today's debate to highlight the deep crisis over ambulance and emergency care services. We owe it to all our constituents to ensure that the crisis is fixed, because it can be a matter of life and death. Last but not least, I want to thank the incredibly hard-working doctors, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers, reception staff and call handlers who work in our emergency care and ambulance services. They are doing an impossibly difficult job at a very difficult time. We cannot ignore the workforce crisis, and the stress and impact on the lives of the current workforce. We owe them our support here, and I want to assure all of them that all of us here will not go away until we see real progress and real improvement.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered waiting times for ambulances and emergency department care.

Energy-intensive Industries

11 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for energy intensive industries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful that we have the opportunity to address the mounting problems currently facing energy-intensive industries. Over the past few months there has been increasing concern—turning to panic—about the energy crisis and the huge rises in gas and electricity bills. Households and families are struggling, as are many of our businesses.

As we all do in this place, I spend a significant amount of time in conversation with businesses and workers in my constituency and across the country, hearing about their concerns, anxieties and plans for the next few months and years. Those industries are the lifeblood of our economy, and those workers are the beating heart of this country's wealth, growth, production and potential. Energy-intensive industries, such as steel, food manufacturing, chemicals and building materials, are fundamental to our economy. Those industries tell me, time and again, about rising energy prices. I am aware of case after case of businesses, having survived a very difficult few years during the pandemic, being brought to their knees by eyewatering energy prices.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Once energy-intensive industries are gone, it is very hard to get them back. Does she agree that the Government need to support our energy-intensive businesses, as other countries are doing, before it is too late?

Judith Cummins: I absolutely agree; these industries are fundamental to the future of our economy. The Minister can imagine my dismay when I raised one of the cases from my constituency with the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 7 June, and I was told that my example was just an “extreme” case. Therefore, presumably, it was not worth his time addressing. The case in question is an energy-intensive business in my constituency, whose energy bills have risen from £7 million to £35 million. However, that is not an extreme case. In fact, industry after industry have been warning for months about the impending problems, and raising the alarm on the dire situation they now find themselves in.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): One such industry is in my constituency, Tata Chemicals Europe. The managing director has fed back to me exactly your concerns; it is a real live issue across the country.

Judith Cummins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is a national problem and needs a response from the UK Government. Almost all industries are feeling the effects of soaring energy prices. However, for some industries, such as chemicals, steel, ceramics, cement and shipping, it is their extreme energy intensity and the singularity of their outputs that make it nearly impossible

for them to react to energy price fluctuations. Those energy-intensive industries face a unique set of challenges that need to be addressed directly by the Government or they will face significant job cuts, lost investment and, ultimately, factories closing. There are good jobs at risk here.

If that seems too extreme for the Minister, he should know that Make UK, which represents Britain's manufacturing industry, has made it clear that more than two thirds of companies claim that rising energy costs are causing “catastrophic” or “major” disruption to their businesses. Make UK has said that eyewatering energy costs have become “a matter of survival” and has called on Ministers to do “whatever it takes” to support businesses and protect jobs. Without that, they face pushing these essential industries closer to breaking point.

The UK's glass industry also faces an increasingly challenging position. With energy prices tripling and gas bills quadrupling, the glass industry has repeatedly asked the Government to recognise the unbearable pressure these prices have placed on an industry that is so vital to the UK. It needs support—any support—because price hikes are putting UK glass manufacturers at a competitive disadvantage, risking undoing the hard work on decarbonisation, quashing inward investment and, ultimately, passing on a rise in prices to consumers at a time when we all know that inflation is already ballooning out of control.

While the Government continue to bury their head in the sand, it is working people who will pay the price and suffer. British Glass states that

“without firm action to address the industrial energy crisis, we risk...loss of employment across the north of England.”

I say to the Minister, this is not levelling up; this is the Government playing fast and loose with other people's jobs.

The Government's own figures, laid out in the latest energy price comparisons, reveal that industrial electricity prices in the UK are significantly higher compared with the rest of Europe, and indeed the world, with extra-large consumers facing prices 40% above the median of the EU14. It is worth noting that under the coalition Government, BEIS used to publish annual energy prices and bill impact reports, but that has been stopped. Minister, will you outline when those reports will be reinstated?

The energy White Paper in 2020 called for

“a strategic dialogue between government, consumers and industry on affordability and fairness”,

but that has not happened yet. Will the Minister update me on any progress in those conversations?

The petrochemical group INEOS has also warned that British manufacturing is now under serious threat from competing regions, such as the US, because of high energy costs. It cites our producers facing gas prices seven times higher than the levels paid by US competitors. To put the size of the problem into perspective, INOVYN, a chlorine manufacturer operating in Runcorn, on the banks of the Mersey, uses as much electricity as the nearby city of Liverpool.

However, the problem is not new. Last year, UK Steel published its report into the huge structural barriers it faces because of out-of-control energy prices.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some very good points and I congratulate her on securing the debate. She is right to highlight the challenges faced by manufacturing business. Does she recognise, as I do, that rural businesses, including smaller rural businesses, are often reliant on oil for their heating? They face a quadrupling, or worse, in the cost of the oil to heat the buildings in which they operate and their staff work. Will she join me in asking the Minister to look not just at oil for heating homes, but specifically at the oil that businesses in rural areas depend on to heat offices, and to come up with a solution to support those businesses?

Judith Cummins: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member about the importance of all businesses needing support at this perilous time.

Last year, the Government declared that they were “firmly committed to ensuring the UK continues to be one of the best locations in the world”

for car manufacturing. Fast forward to June 2022 and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has seen its energy prices surge by 50% in a single year and is facing a £90 million hike or the equivalent of 2,500 jobs.

Nissan has contacted me to make clear that the viability of its £1 billion investment in British projects is on the line because its energy costs have risen almost 150% beyond expectations. I remind the Minister that the car industry delivers £5.7 billion into the economy every year. This vital sector, which contains multiple industries—some of which the Government have deemed energy intensive, and some of which they will not—cannot and should not be left to falter. Some 22,000 jobs are on the line, when it comes to our transition to battery-powered cars, and with manufacturers currently making decisions about where to invest, the Government are demonstrating that they cannot be trusted to make energy-conscious decisions for energy-intensive businesses.

Energy security is equally essential for energy-intensive industries. While British businesses are paying through the nose for gas, electricity and oil, the Government cannot even guarantee that the lights will be kept on this winter. The Government describe such suggestions as alarmist, but it is their own modelling that suggests that, due to shortages, 6 million homes could face power cuts this winter, and heavy industrial users of gas—including gas-fired power stations, which are essential to our electricity production—could be told to stop production. The Government have failed time and again to get this right. Quite frankly, it is shocking and completely unacceptable that they have mismanaged the situation to such an extent that their own modelling cannot guarantee a consistent energy supply for industries this winter.

This was all foreseeable and foreseen. In September 2021, I raised the flag that the Government’s decision to disinvest from gas storage was a mistake, but the Government chose not to listen. The Business Secretary told me that we are less reliant on storage than our European neighbours, and we could simply rely on our diversified energy portfolio, including 30% of our natural gas coming direct from Norway. Well, that comment has not aged well. Yesterday, the *Financial Times* revealed that Norway’s state-owned pipeline could stop totally, with shut-off as soon as this weekend—a crisis only narrowly averted by the Norwegian Government’s

intervention late last night. This all highlights the complete instability of our energy supply and the energy situation. During the biggest energy price crisis in living memory, the UK has more gas than we know what to do with, but we cannot store it in readiness for a difficult and harsh winter, leaving us in the maddening crisis of wasted gas resources and extortionate energy bills.

Months after dismissing my concerns and those of energy-intensive industry leaders and trade unions, the Government are left scrambling to find an emergency solution to secure extra energy supplies ahead of this winter. Centrica has announced that it is in exploratory discussions with the UK Government about reopening Rough, which closed in 2017 and was Britain’s largest gas storage facility. Will the Minister outline exactly what the plan is for gas storage in the UK? Will he address Rough, in particular, and timescales, so that we can be reassured of getting through the harsh winter?

Against the backdrop of high energy bills, strategically important energy-intensive industries need proper support to protect our economy and workers’ jobs and to keep our country’s energy supply secure. Baker and Baker, a leading European manufacturer of bakery products, headquartered in the UK and with hundreds of employees in my constituency, is a high energy-intensive industry, which has invested widely in state-of-the-art equipment to stay competitive. Its energy costs have increased by almost 200% in a single year, which has a significant impact on its business and a knock-on effect of increasing the prices that customers pay for products at all our major supermarkets.

The Government’s energy-intensive industries compensation scheme, which was extended at the end of April, was a welcome step to alleviate some of the electricity costs that those industries face, but they must do more. The scale of the challenge demands Government intervention to support the industries. Both the Chemical Industries Association and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders have cautioned the Government that the prolonged energy costs that they face could see factories reducing operations and foreign firms taking their business elsewhere.

The Government must act now to support these businesses and protect British jobs and British production. The longer this goes on, the higher the risk to those industries and our economy, but also to our national security. Businesses face a 500% increase in wholesale gas prices, which is completely in line with the fivefold increase to energy prices in my constituency. UK Glass faces a quadrupling of energy costs through gas prices. Car manufactures face a £90 million spike, or worse, with Nissan facing a 150% increase. UK energy prices are 40% higher than those of competitors when it comes to extra-large consumers. These examples are not extreme; they are the reality for British businesses.

Will the Government introduce a proper pack of measures to support energy-intensive industries? Can the Minister outline what those measures would be and when they will be available? We need to ensure that there is a level playing field for British businesses and industries to survive, let alone compete. Finally, can the Minister guarantee that no energy-intensive business will be left in the dark because of energy supply issues this winter or allowed to fail because of the astronomical energy costs? That would be a disaster.

Minister, to put it simply: the Government need a plan. What is it and where is it?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for calling this debate today. It is an important issue and it is right that we debate it in the detail and depth it deserves. I recognise how important this issue is in many parts of the country, both from the perspective of my constituency and from being a Minister for the past 10 months. I know that there are hon. Members, both present and not in attendance, who have a very extensive interest in this and are very concerned about the challenges—which we hope are temporary—that the industry faces. We recognise those challenges.

First, lest it be suggested otherwise—I am sure that is not the intention of the hon. Lady—I want to say that energy-intensive industries are important to the United Kingdom and important to the UK Government. They are important because they provide resilience within our supply chains over the long term; are representative of British manufacturing and the fantastic things it does; and provide a historic link to our past and our proud energy and manufacturing background.

That importance is why I have spent much of my time as a Minister over the past 10 months talking to our energy-intensive industries. I speak almost weekly with at least one representative—sometimes more—from the energy-intensive industries. I have been on regular visits, including to glass factories in the north-west, paper mills in the east midlands, steel factories in Wales—the UK Steel representatives in the Public Gallery are very welcome—and chemical factories in Teesside. Over the past 10 months, I hope that I, as Minister, have demonstrated to the industries that I am interested in hearing their views—views that the hon. Member for Bradford South has articulated—and in engaging in open dialogue.

We want to understand the industries' concerns and issues and to work through them in a careful, calmed and reasonable process—in the way that public policy should be created—to work out what is reasonable and proportionate. We discussed the issues on Monday in one of our regular UK steel discussions with unions and companies representing the industry. At those meetings, we come together and have exactly the kind of strategic dialogue that the hon. Member for Bradford South was talking about. The Government will continue to do that in the coming months. I want to make very clear that energy-intensive industries are important in terms of what has been done, and we need to ensure that they are listened to and heard on an ongoing basis.

I want to be clear that there is a challenge. When I speak to colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and Opposition Members who feel just as strongly, I know how important it is that we acknowledge that there are difficulties. There are global difficulties because of unprecedented circumstances—we all accept that—which we did not anticipate. It is very difficult to anticipate the first invasion of a sovereign country on European soil for 70 years, which is what Putin did. It is difficult to anticipate the price spikes and the volatility in the market that comes from that. That is not something that can be easily managed away, but none the less it has

caused issues for a number of energy-intensive industries as well as the wider sector. The Government are working through how they can support that.

We recognise that this follows a number of years where energy-intensive industries have been clear that while the Government have brought forward support, undertaken dialogue and are doing what they can, there is a price differential compared with Europe, and we understand that. That is one reason why we brought forward the British energy security strategy in April. It includes many elements, addresses the long-term approach to energy and indicates our continuing support for industry.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent has been incredibly successful since the Conservatives came to power. We have virtually doubled gross value added. However, we now face serious challenges, particularly because of energy costs. Most or all of the ceramics industry has not been eligible for Government support because most of the industry is too small and many of the NACE codes do not qualify. Does my hon. Friend agree that there must be a level playing field and we must address this issue to ensure that support in place for the ceramics industry?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion of the ceramics industry, and I know how important it is for his constituency. As he indicates, it has been a real success story for our country, and we want to ensure that it continues to be a success story. His advocacy in this place is absolutely the way to ensure that that happens. We accept that there is a challenge—there is no question of that. Over recent months, the Government have acknowledged that challenge in papers such as the British energy security strategy, which is important and has been welcomed by a number of industries as part of our ongoing dialogue, and have started doing things to address it.

I am glad the hon. Member for Bradford South has acknowledged and welcomed the compensation scheme. It is not something to quickly pass over; it is a substantial increase in money—if that is the yardstick we are using. It is substantial confirmation that we are serious about supporting our energy-intensive industries. From the extensive conversations I have had with colleagues in this place and with the industries themselves, the changes coming from that have been welcomed. When people say, “The Government need to do something”, the Government have done something.

The energy security strategy is clear that there will be a further consultation on a further element of what we are seeking to do, and I expect that to begin shortly. We are considering using that strategic dialogue, which the hon. Lady indicated is important, about what else is reasonable and proportionate to do over a longer period of time. None of these issues is straightforward or has a simple solution; otherwise, this Government or previous ones, including the Labour Government pre-2010, would have done it. It is a difficult and challenging problem and we need to do something about it, as the Government have done, and look at what can be done in the future.

I will address a few of the hon. Lady's points. Unless we contextualise this conversation and conduct it in a reasonable manner, it will go off in all sorts of directions that are ultimately unhelpful. I understand that ultimately it is for other people to choose their words, focuses and

emphases, but there has been progress on this agenda in recent months and that should be acknowledged. It is recognised that the Government are absolutely serious about supporting these industries.

Judith Cummins: I take that as some kind of criticism of my words, many of which were given to me to represent British industrial businesses. We have heard so much from the Minister about the difficulty, accepting that there is a challenge and listening, but he needs to act because British businesses and energy-intensive businesses are suffering and crying out for more help.

Lee Rowley: Those are exactly the kinds of statements that I think, with the greatest of respect, are not entirely helpful. The Government have acted, and it should be acknowledged that we have done so. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been brought forward in recent weeks, which should be acknowledged as a significant step forward. As I have already said during the past 10 minutes, we accept there is a challenge, and we are going to do more. We have already committed to bringing forward at least one additional consultation—

Judith Cummins *rose—*

Lee Rowley: I am happy for the hon. Member for Bradford South to take some of my time. What exactly should we do?

Judith Cummins: I am happy to take up some of the Minister's time. Shall I repeat the eight questions that I asked in my speech that he has not—*[Interruption.]*

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief and to the point. It is not a dialogue.

Judith Cummins: I am happy to send the Minister a copy of the eight questions I asked him in my speech. He is yet to address a single one of them.

Lee Rowley: The challenge with this debate is that we all accept there is a problem, and we all accept that there is a wider context of global issues—some of which are beyond our control—but ultimately, the hon. Lady needs to propose as well as oppose. If she has a proposition, I would be very happy to hear it, as would the Government, but I did not hear a proposition in the 20 minutes that she spoke for.

“Do more” needs to be followed by another sentence that says precisely what to do, because when you talk to energy-intensive industries—I am not suggesting that the hon. Lady does not—and have detailed dialogue with them, you realise that there is a significant amount of nuance underlying this discussion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has outlined, you have some energy-intensive industries that are very heavily based on gas. You have other energy-intensive industries that are very heavily based on electricity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) has indicated. Other businesses that are not energy-intensive industries are also reliant on some unusual ways of procuring and using energy, and if we do not recognise that nuance in any solutions that we propose, ultimately—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I have let it go so far, but I do not have views on these things when I am in the Chair. The hon. Gentleman is not the only

Member who has transgressed that rule during the debate, but can he refer to hon. Members, not “you”?

Lee Rowley: My apologies for not using the correct nomenclature, Mr Stringer.

The point I am making is that there is a variety of nuances underlying this discussion. We have energy-intensive industries that are heavily dependent on one source of fuel, and energy-intensive industries that are heavily dependent on another. We have some industries that are very heavily hedged and some that are not. We have some differences when it comes to the significance of the change in energy costs. We have some industries that are within the compensation scheme, and some that are without it. Some are in other schemes, and some have already applied for schemes that are already open, including the industrial energy transformation fund, which is another £300 million of Government funding—of taxpayer subsidy—to help the sector.

The point I am making to the hon. Member for Bradford South is not that there is not a challenge—I have repeatedly indicated that there is. It is not that we do not value energy-intensive industries, nor that I do not want to listen, and I accept that she is acting completely in good faith in trying to record and highlight the challenges that energy-intensive industries in her constituency face. However, the question is exactly what we do about it, and that strategic dialogue is under way at the moment.

Mike Amesbury: CF Fertilisers, which employs many people from my constituency of Weaver Vale, is located in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and also has many employees there. Over 300 of those people now face losing their jobs. I know there have been discussions with a consortium that has come forward and some reference to a bridging loan, but that would require some intervention, hopefully from the Government, with a potential purchase. It may be beyond the scope of today's discussion, but I would be interested to know how that is progressing.

Lee Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that this matter is important to employees at the Ince factory, just as it is important to those at the Billingham factory. I have 50 seconds left of my speech, so I am afraid I cannot address that issue directly, but the hon. Gentleman has absolutely made his point and has been clear about the implications for that locality.

In the few moments I have to sum up, the key point I want to make is not that the Government do not agree there is a challenge, or that we do not think energy-intensive industries are valuable to the United Kingdom—they absolutely are. The point I am trying to highlight is that we are talking to those industries in a careful, calm and methodical manner, working out all the nuances and differences that underlie this issue, and seeking to determine how, over time, we can bring forward solutions that work for the long term. However, we must also recognise that £2 billion in support has been provided since 2013, and that we have done much in recent weeks, too.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Home Energy Efficiency: North of England

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): It feels somewhat hot in here to me. If hon. Members wish to remove their jackets, that is perfectly in order.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy efficiency of homes in the north of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am delighted to bring this debate to Westminster Hall. At the outset, I declare my interest as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on housing and planning and of the all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery. I also place on the record my thanks to North Star Housing, the Conservative Environment Network, the Northern Housing Consortium and the National Housing Federation for their insightful and helpful engagement with me on this important issue in preparation for today's debate.

Twenty-six per cent. of the north's carbon emissions come from our homes—26%. If we are to tackle climate change and meet net zero, we have to do something about that 26%, in addition to all the other things that we are doing. Despite all the house building going on around the country, the UK's housing stock is generally older than that across the rest of Europe. And in the north, we have a higher percentage of older properties than the rest of the country: 24% of all homes in the north were built before 1919, and 41% were built before 1944. These older homes are largely beautiful, characterful properties that provide us with the backdrop to much of our northern constituencies, but they pose serious issues when it comes to energy efficiency. Solid walls prevent the use of cavity insulation, and planning constraints require buildings to retain their character, making exterior work harder. That is alongside many other issues. Our Victorian terraces have proved particularly difficult to treat. However, we must find solutions to ensure that these homes are fit for the future. Future generations will thank us for our foresight in preserving these homes and doing our bit to save the planet.

The poor energy efficiency of homes in the north only serves to make our higher rates of fuel poverty even worse, compounding the problem. In my region, the north-east, we have the third highest levels of fuel poverty in England. Even before the price cap increased, 14% of households in Darlington and 15% in County Durham were classed as fuel-poor. Decarbonising homes and making them more energy efficient has the potential to offer part of the long-term solution to fuel poverty. Insulating homes better and reducing the reliance on fossil fuels to heat homes means less money spent on wasted energy, less money spent. It is a win-win for our homes, their residents and the environment.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I recognise the argument that the hon. Member is making about the north of England. I hope he will not mind my saying that my constituents in the north of London face similar problems and issues of fuel poverty. I am sure that all MPs here would say that emails on those issues are clogging our inbox. People up and down the country

have been left uniquely exposed to the global gas crisis, because of the slashing of gas storage, the failure to regulate the market properly and the failure to invest in nuclear and renewables. Does the hon. Member think that we need a radically new approach to energy efficiency from the Government, and does he agree that they should seek to match Labour's pledge to insulate 19 million homes over the next decade?

Peter Gibson: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. If she is referring to homes in her constituency, I can well understand and imagine that they have the same issues as homes in the north of England. My objective in calling this debate was to have a constructive and non-partisan debate in order to raise the important issues that are relevant to my constituents and to concentrate on what the Government can do on top of what they are already doing. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Minister will do in his summing-up.

Energy efficiency also presents an opportunity to improve health outcomes in the north. Each winter, there are around 30,000 more deaths due to inadequate heating in homes. Retrofitting homes has the potential to seriously improve the health outcomes of those who currently live in poor housing. Health and wellbeing rightly have a prominent place in our levelling-up missions, and I want to impress on the Minister the real need to look closely at the benefits of retrofitting northern homes for that purpose. It is not cheap, but we all know that if you buy cheap, you buy twice.

Now, Darlington is a beautiful town, rich in heritage and filled with many traditional homes. We are, of course, the birthplace of the railways, and it is indeed the railway heritage and engineering industry that caused the expansion of our town. In Darlington, 65% of energy performance certificate ratings given to our homes are band D or below. That piles the extra cost of wasted energy on to the residents of those homes—at current energy prices. Merely upgrading homes from EPC band D to band C would cut heating demand by 20% for millions of households and would represent an estimated £2.9 billion bill saving per year in the north-east region.

However, with 62% of homes—around 4 million—in the north below EPC band C, that is a huge challenge. Currently, many stakeholders feel it is simply not financially viable to achieve. I want the Minister to know that I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge. The complexities of private ownership, private renting, and social housing in the mix make it a difficult puzzle to solve.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In the spirit in which the hon. Member framed his earlier comments, I agree with everything he has said so far. He is right both to highlight the significance of domestic carbon emissions and to link it to fuel poverty. He may be interested to know that, in Sheffield, pretty much in line with the figures he has given, 60% of homes fail the EPC band C standard. The figure across Yorkshire and the Humber as a whole is worse, at 65%.

The hon. Member talked about a win-win. Does he agree that it would be a win-win-win-win-win if we did more on retro-insulation, because it cuts carbon emissions and fuel bills, tackles health issues, reduces our reliance on gas imports and creates jobs? Does he therefore share my desire for the Government to have greater ambition on retro-insulation?

Peter Gibson: It is as though the hon. Member has read a paragraph later in my speech. It would, indeed, be a win-win if we tackle this issue. Can we afford to not tackle the issue? Can we afford to not reap those health benefits, the energy cost savings, the wasted energy usage savings, and the preservation of our built environment?

I must acknowledge the work that the Government have done so far to tackle this issue. The heat and buildings strategy was published in October 2021, setting out the Government's planned approach to reducing emissions from heating buildings. The social housing decarbonisation fund has awarded £179 million to 69 projects.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My hon. Friend is articulating well the need for further measures to improve our housing stock. I am sure he will agree that now is an opportune moment to move ahead with this, given the pressure on household budgets. Blackpool received £1.4 million from the social housing decarbonisation fund, and I am sure his constituency has benefited, too. Will he welcome those grants already given and support the need for further action to drive down those household bills?

Peter Gibson: Being familiar with my hon. Friend's constituency, I well understand the situation and issues that his constituents face, as they are similar to those in my own. I was about to say that the Tees Valley Combined Authority has secured £2.6million from the social housing decarbonisation fund, from which homes in Darlington will benefit. I am grateful for that, and I welcome the contribution that my hon. Friend has secured for his constituency.

The local authority delivery scheme is also helping to improve energy efficiency: it is expected to save households across the country more than £2 million on energy bills every year. It is welcome that nearly 40% of the households that have been upgraded under the scheme are in the north. I also welcome the decision of the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), to cut VAT on home upgrades in the spring statement, encouraging people to invest in wall and loft insulation. I know that the Minister will agree that we must continue this good work, and I ask what the Government can do to roll out the schemes more widely.

Although progress is under way on decarbonisation and retrofitting, we still have a long way to go, but I want to focus on the need to tackle the huge cost currently associated with making our homes more energy efficient. We cannot achieve decarbonisation while it remains financially unviable for homeowners, private landlords and housing associations to pay for the work. We also need to ensure that we bring communities with us as we embark on this challenge. Recent research by Onward found that people think that the invasion of Ukraine means we should be moving more quickly on net zero, but retrofitting a home is intrusive work, and many people do not see it as a priority for them. We need to be clear what the benefit of this work is to our communities, and the connection between home heating and reaching net zero must be emphasised. How can the Government make it clear to communities how they stand to benefit from more energy efficient homes? That is a challenge that I hope the Minister can respond to.

As part of my preparation for the debate, I have been in contact with Angela Lockwood and Emma Speight at North Star Housing to discuss the difficulties faced by housing associations when it comes to decarbonisation and retrofitting their properties. In short, they are fully supportive of moves to decarbonise homes, but the costs involved are prohibitive. To illustrate this, they made me aware of a pilot decarbonisation project that they are carrying out on a two-bedroom, late-Victorian terraced house in Middlesbrough that they are aiming to get to EPC level A, so that they can then monitor the performance of the building.

I have the figures in front of me. North Star Housing calculates that the cost of decarbonisation work will be £45,500, with £12,000 going on solid wall insulation alone. While the work is being carried out, the property must sit empty for around 20 weeks, resulting in a void period and a loss of rental income. Given that other houses on the same street are valued at around £70,000, North Star Housing is looking at spending well over half of the value of a property in order to decarbonise it. It is simply not viable for housing associations to be spending that much to decarbonise their stock without targeted support and assistance.

Equally, private owners of those properties will face similar costs. However, although the up-front costs may be high, investing in the region's homes now is, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, a win-win scenario for northern communities, because it will lead to warmer, healthier homes. Upgrading a home from EPC E to EPC C would reduce bills by an average of £595 a year, whereas upgrading from EPC F to EPC G would reduce bills by £1,339 a year. These are not short-term cuts to energy bills, but permanent reductions in household energy consumption, meaning that more of people's money will be spent in our local economy.

The Government have seen that their retrofitting schemes can and do work. Data from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy shows that the total estimated annual bill saving for the 12,143 households upgraded in phase 1 of the local authority delivery scheme is £1.2 million. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to outline what more the Government can do to ensure that we continue to deliver these schemes.

Retrofitting homes in the north will also play a huge part in delivering on our levelling-up agenda, with the north having the best chance to reap the economic benefits of our transition to a low-carbon economy compared with other regions of the UK. The large-scale retrofitting of homes in the north has the potential to deliver new skilled jobs in the green industries of the future—again, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central said, a win-win.

The Northern Housing Consortium's "Northern Powerhomes" report showed that a large-scale programme of social housing retrofitting could lead to the creation of 77,000 jobs in the north by 2035, 15,000 of which could be in the north-east. However, we have only around 1,200 qualified heat pump installers across the UK, so we clearly have a skills gap. I urge the Minister to do all he can to plug that skills gap and attract new entrants to the good green jobs that a focus on northern housing can deliver.

I also ask the Minister when the new energy company obligation scheme will begin. In the north, a high proportion of homes are fitted with insulation measures through

[Peter Gibson]

ECO, and the support the scheme gives to low-income households is highly valuable. I understood that ECO4 was expected to begin in April. I would welcome any clarity the Minister can provide on the potential expansion of the scheme and when we might expect it.

We are now free of the bounds of Europe, and we can be bold, imaginative, creative and entrepreneurial. If we can lead the way in the north-east with carbon capture technology or hydrogen production, with vision our region can lead the way in innovating the retrofitting our old homes.

The north-east already has some innovative solutions. The Coal Authority in Gateshead is using mine water to generate heat for local homes and businesses. Will the Minister look closely at that project to see how it can be exploited at scale? Many gas boilers can already be made hydrogen-ready. As we transition away from fossil fuels, will the Minister look at what steps he can take to make every new boiler installed hydrogen-ready as soon as possible, rather than waiting for some date way off in the future?

Millions of homes across the country are just like those in the north, so the Government need both the carrot and the stick to drive this forward. We have no time to lose. I am proud of our built environment and want it to be preserved and protected for future generations, but I want my constituents' homes to be warm and efficient too. There should not be a binary choice between two ambitions. There is a range of imaginative policy solutions and ideas to accelerate this process, including changes to stamp duty, incentives for home buyers to carry out these works at the beginning of their ownership, and creative financing through green mortgages, whereby the lender provides an initial sum on the original drawdown to fund the works, with the necessary conditions in place to ensure that the funds are not diverted elsewhere. We can even use the taxation system, through salary sacrifice. If it is good enough to fund car hire, the purchase of a bike or childcare, it should be good enough to provide improvements to our homes.

It is clear that improving the energy efficiency of homes in the north is a huge challenge. However, it can bring huge benefits to communities such as mine in Darlington. We can permanently bring down heating costs for millions of households, improve health outcomes for some of the most vulnerable in our society and level up communities that have been left behind by getting behind new, innovative green industries and delivering highly skilled jobs for our constituencies. I hope the Minister will give serious thought to all the points I have raised, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the contributions from across the Chamber.

2.48 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on bringing this important debate to the House. Some of us were not sure whether the Government would be able to field a Minister for this debate, but most of us are glad to see the Minister in his place. Hopefully, he will be able to address some of our queries and concerns.

The cost of living crisis is hurting every constituency represented in the House of Commons. We have to be up front about the impact of housing on the cost of living, physical health and mental health. We have a housing crisis in this country. Many people cannot afford to rent, let alone pay the large deposit that is needed to purchase a home. We need a wider debate on the housing crisis across Britain, but particularly in the constituencies represented by northern MPs.

I agree almost entirely with what the hon. Member for Darlington had to say about the measures that the Government should take, but I will also highlight the fact that recently the standing charge for gas and electricity has increased. The unit charge has gone up significantly in the past few months, but the standing charge has doubled or increased even more in some cases, so that needs to be highlighted. Energy efficiency for a home or a house has a direct impact on the amount that people pay out for the use of gas and electricity. I appreciate that the standing charge will be the standing charge, but if we made our homes more efficient and cut carbon emissions, that would help people with the cost of living crisis.

The Government always talk about the progress that they have made in improving the efficiency of homes over the last 12 years, but the reality is that schemes are often poorly thought out and badly delivered. On that note, I will highlight a case from my constituency.

A constituent contacted me regarding the cavity wall insulation scheme. In 2013, he had cavity wall insulation fitted in his house for free through a Government initiative. He says that the work should not have been carried out because his house was not suitable, but the Government were funding this scheme so, in his words, many "cowboy firms" signed up to do such work and made an enormous amount of money.

Unfortunately, my constituent has not been able to let out the house where the work was done, or use it himself, because there have been lots of problems as a result of that work. He took the firm to court and was awarded £37,000 to repair his property, but he has never received that money because the firm that did the work has ceased trading.

My constituent works full time as an electrician, working between 46 and 50 hours a week, and he is facing serious financial hardship. That is having an effect on his mental and physical health, and he is in a lot of debt. He contacted my office and he feels that the Government have let him down badly. I have highlighted that case and I will write to the Minister after the debate, and I hope that he will be able to respond with something positive for my constituent.

The second case that I will highlight is that of Ms Phoebe Spence. I visited her a few months ago. She feels that it is very troubling that the Government are not making any effort to insulate homes effectively, are lacking in a strategy and are not addressing fuel poverty. I visited her home, which is a three-bedroom former council house that was built in 1920 on the first council estate in the Borough of Stockport. She had it retrofitted with external wall insulation and she has also had an air source heat pump installed. I was lucky enough to visit her and have a cup of tea with her, and she took the time from her day to show me all the changes that she has had carried out on the property. She said that she was able to fund that work because she had received a redundancy pay-out and also some savings, but unfortunately not everyone can afford such work.

I was elected in 2019, but in the years since I have submitted several written parliamentary questions on this issue. Parliamentary question 87882 was tabled on the health inequalities that exist as a result of inadequate housing in Stockport, Greater Manchester, the north-west and England. The Minister who responded was the now infamous right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), but his answer did not really address the question. I hope that the Government will listen to Members on both sides of the House and that the Minister will be able to respond with something positive for both the constituents I have mentioned. Thank you for calling me early in the debate, Mr Robertson.

2.53 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate, Mr Robertson, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I begin by congratulating my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), on securing this important debate. Although energy efficiency has always been important from an environmental standpoint, the significant increase in energy costs that the UK is experiencing has made it more relevant than ever. Cost of living pressures, and the changing economics of gas and green energy, have significantly increased the opportunities provided by energy efficiency. The cost of gas has increased dramatically, but the cost of installing a heat pump or something similar has not moved. However, the economics are changing massively, in terms of how this will play out.

Sedgefield surrounds Darlington, and it has many villages, from Hurworth to Ferryhill, and from Wheatly Hill to Piercebridge. It has a variety of different properties. Given that the constituency also covers almost 240 square miles, it has many farmhouses and outlying buildings that present energy efficiency challenges.

According to statistics from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy produced in April, the north-east has one of the highest rates of fuel poverty in the country. Energy efficiency is one of the three factors that cause fuel poverty, according to the End Fuel Poverty coalition. Although improvements to energy efficiency in households that are struggling with energy costs will not solve the problem on their own, they are certainly a welcome step.

Durham County Council estimates that improving energy efficiency in homes in former mining villages could save households around £250 a year on bills. I think that figure was calculated before the current inflationary price increases, so it is probably much more than that now. The Government have a role to play in enabling residents to make their homes more energy efficient. Although it was not perfect, the green homes grant voucher scheme was broadly popular in providing a substantial subsidy for those who wanted to make their home more energy efficient, but could not cover the entire cost of doing so. The local authority portion of the scheme, which awarded councils funding to upgrade homes for low-income families, was particularly necessary, given how expensive such upgrades can be. For example, the tradesperson site My Builder estimates that insulation work starts at around £200 per external cavity wall. Such work on a two-storey terraced house would cost about £400, but the price increases steeply for buildings built before the 1920s, which usually have solid walls. In

that case, internal wall insulation starts at £4,000, but can cost much more depending on the size of the house. Solid wall insulation is even more expensive, starting at around £7,000, and without some help, it is likely that many households in need of insulation would not be able to afford it.

To make rural homes energy efficient is a particular challenge, because they are often, or rather always, somewhat isolated and not connected to gas mains. To enable those properties to have a low-carbon heating scheme was one of the measures covered by the green homes grant. To be fair, Durham County Council took full advantage of it, using more than £5 million of Government funding to install more than 100 low-carbon heating systems in rural homes across the county. It also used to funding to install insulation in villages such as Chilton and Ferryhill. I was pleased to join Lord Callanan when he visited to inspect the properties and to see how delighted the residents were with the scheme, and how much it had improved their situation.

Another barrier to making homes energy efficient, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, is absentee landlords. We may have a terrace of low-value houses and while it is all well and good for someone to insulate their own house and the two walls adjoining the other properties, if the house next door is empty, there will be a great deal of leakage from the heating system. That situation does not incentivise people to make their properties energy efficient. Similarly, a tenant whose landlord has refused to make their house more energy efficient has no option but to pay more for their energy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington has also referred to the fact that the cost of updating a property compared with its value is a major problem in the north. In some of my villages, property can have a value as low as £40,000 or £50,000. If someone has to spend between £5,000 and £10,000 on insulation, even at a basic level that represents a substantial amount of the value of the property. Neither the individual, nor a social landlord or private landlord, will see value in trying to do that. However, it is important for that work to be done so that householders have a better economic base for paying their ongoing fuel costs. We need to make sure that we support them in that endeavour.

We have many different styles of housing in the constituency, so we need a range of insulation options. The same is true about our move to green energy. The local geography provides particular challenges and opportunities. Former mining villages, where houses are close together, are suitable for district heating systems. Geothermal heating is also a possibility in County Durham due to the former mines. Some of my colleagues recently wrote in *The Times* that the Durham Energy Institute at Durham University has led the way on that research for a while. Support of such solutions can make a huge difference for residents and home owners, whether they are individuals or landlords. I believe that the solutions are out there, and I would like to continue to support the variety of initiatives that help, whether that is supporting insulation, addressing empty properties or promoting the transition to options that could be greener and more cost efficient in the long term, such as a district heating system—possibly even driven by the utilisation of mine water heating. Those opportunities, once in place, can be cheap to run and environmentally

[Paul Howell]

efficient. I am confident that we have the solutions to the north-east's domestic energy problems, but it is a question of ensuring that they reach the households that need them. The Government have made progress in this area. I look forward to them continuing that and taking further steps.

3 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for giving us all the opportunity to be here to debate and ask questions of the Minister on this vital subject. Retrofitting homes, and ensuring that new homes are built to meet energy-efficient standards, is one of the most important things we can do to meet our net zero commitments by 2050. It was only in 2019 that Parliament declared a climate emergency. To reach net zero, we have to insulate Britain and if we do not, we will miss those targets by a mile.

The challenge we have before us is, of course, immense. The UK's housing stock, as the hon. Member pointed out, is among the oldest in the world and the leakiest in western Europe. It is thanks to the Government's inability to build the necessary number of houses of the right tenure and in the right places that things are going at a snail's pace. There is considerable debate about the immediate challenges facing the Government around targets, but the consensus is around the 300,000 mark, which is highlighted in the Bill currently going through Parliament. As we speak, new homes are not, in the majority of cases, being built to the standard of energy efficiency we would expect. In fact, 1.5 million new homes have not met that standard over recent years. As hon. Members across the Chamber have rightly pointed out, that contributes to the dire situation on energy costs for every family in this country. There were reports in the media today—despite lots of other things we are focusing on, particularly the Government—that those bills are projected to rise to £3,000, so this is more important than ever. The failings on residential energy efficiency must be seen through the lens not only of the Government's failure on climate policy, but of their failure to ensure that everyone in this country has a good, safe home.

Across the north, 19% of all homes are classed as non-decent and 12% fail to meet minimum standards, posing a category 1 health hazard to residents, which means potential death, permanent paralysis or serious injury. What kind of society lets 12% of its constituents live in those conditions? The energy efficiency of homes in much of the north is below the English average, which has been rightly pointed out as being shockingly low in itself. Across the country, nearly 60% of homes are not in the top three bands for energy efficiency. The north-west comes in just under the national average and the north-east just above, but Yorkshire is falling far behind and has the lowest proportion of any English region, with only one in three houses meeting efficiency standards.

Applying regional figures on energy certificates to the number of dwellings in the two local authorities covered by my constituency of Weaver Vale gives a rough idea of the scale of the challenge more locally. Some 35,000 homes

in Halton alone need to be upgraded, alongside an incredible 96,000 in Cheshire West and Chester. As well as being a huge challenge, upgrading 19 million homes nationwide is an incredible opportunity. The economic case for making homes green is clear in the levelling-up White Paper, which has been referenced. In fact, the White Paper talks about an intervention in skills creating opportunities and 240,000 jobs by 2035 for the upgrading of homes. The hon. Member for Darlington referred to 77,000 jobs in the north. It is a strong case that has political consensus.

Can the Minister outline what the Government are doing to work with businesses, schools, universities, colleges and training providers to ensure that our localities have the skills that we need? I was at an event yesterday—just as other events were unfolding—at the Royal Society of Arts. Mayor Burnham was there, as well as Mayor Andy Street. Their asks of Government at the moment are to turbocharge devolution, particularly around the skills agenda, and ensure that the budget captured from Whitehall is put into the localities, whether that is Greater Manchester or the west midlands, to drive forward this agenda. Again, it is about common sense and political consensus.

Despite the hon. Member for Darlington referring to the non-partisan nature of the debate, we are of course politicians, and we do have different values and ideas, whether we are social democrats or conservatives. At times, political choices have consequences. Certainly in the past, the Conservative story of green homes has been one of short-term thinking and broken promises. To evidence that, back in 2013, the Conservative-led Government cut energy efficiency programmes. I will of course not let the Liberal Democrats off there, because, despite much denial, they were part of that Government at the time.

Peter Gibson: I beseech the hon. Gentleman to recognise that this is a failure of Governments of all colours over many decades to sufficiently and completely resolve this problem. It is a massive problem that every previous Government have failed to tackle. I welcome the steps the Government have taken, and I have urged the Minister to invest more. If we are going to be party political in this debate, I would love the hon. Gentleman to outline what his Government between 1997 and 2010 did to tackle this problem, because these constituencies that we are talking about were largely Labour-held constituencies at that time.

Mike Amesbury: The standards that were ditched would have come into play in 2015, which would have meant that hundreds of thousands of homes would be retrofitted and insulated and built to better standards. The new standards do not come into play until 2025—that is if the current Government exist over the next few months or even weeks.

There was also the green homes grant flagship scheme, which was scrapped just six months after its launch. There has been reference to the current social housing programme, which I welcome. Certainly, social housing providers in my constituency are trying to capture that investment, but again, it is insufficient, short term and bureaucratic. It could be better. That is feedback we will all get, regardless of our political persuasions.

I doff my cap slightly to the Welsh Labour Government, who have just announced £33 million in green funding for residential developers to help them deliver thermally efficient and lower-carbon homes, many of which will be available for social rent. The Government could do better on that—fewer than 6,000 homes for social rent were built last year. We need to be more ambitious.

Having spoken to developers, social housing organisations and councils, what they really need from the current or future Governments is leadership, clarity and a long-term strategy. If housing associations want to plan for the future, they need to do so in 10 or 20-year cycles. At the moment, with some schemes running for only six months, it is very difficult to plan or invest in some of the basics to do with upskilling our local communities.

In conclusion, I have three questions for the Minister. How will he respond and focus on the long term—despite the current challenges—rather than on the short term, in getting to net zero by 2050? What support will be given to the private rented sector and landlords on retrofitting? What investment is going into stimulating green hydrogen, beyond blue hydrogen, with our various projects, whether in the north-east or in the north-west, which are fantastic for energy-intensive industries? We need that investment, and we need it now.

3.12 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on securing this important debate. The energy efficiency of homes is incredibly important as we face the challenges of climate change, cutting emissions and the cost of living crisis, with sharp increases in energy costs that will be devastating for many of my constituents. It goes without saying, but we all know that the north is colder than the rest of the country, so I am not surprised that he chose to focus on that part of the country for the debate.

I am very concerned about what this winter will bring for those people on low incomes. Many Members have spoken about fuel costs and so forth. The hardship, grinding poverty and health implications should not be underestimated. One of the things that we can do, therefore, is to improve the energy efficiency in existing homes as a matter of urgency.

Citizens Advice has been in Parliament today, and it highlighted the issue. It has talked about how effectively insulated homes will help to reduce soaring energy bills by making heating our homes easier and cheaper by ensuring that heat is retained better. As my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned, however, the UK has the least energy-efficient housing in Europe.

The Government must match the ambition shown by Labour to insulate 19 million homes within a decade. That move would save households an average of £400 a year on their energy bills. I am keen to hear the Minister commit to that. In the Liverpool city region, metro Mayor Steve Rotherham, has invested nearly £60 million to retrofit more than 5,500 homes. Funding is being targeted at the most disadvantaged households, making their homes more energy-efficient and cutting their fuel bills. Many of the more than 700,000 homes across the region could be retrofitted, if the Government were to

come forward with more funding. Will the Government provide additional funding to local areas such as the Liverpool city region so that more homes can be retrofitted?

Will the Minister also tell us what he can do to ensure that we see an increase in the number of apprenticeships in the building skills we need for both retrofitting old homes and building new eco-friendly homes, so that young men and women can acquire the skills we need for our housing stock, secure well-paid and skilled employment, and contribute to their communities in an incredibly practical way?

Finally, I want to say a few words about new build. My constituent Colin, who is an architect, has designed a series of ultra low energy net zero carbon homes. The homes follow the same principles of the award-winning Passivhaus that Colin designed for himself and his wife Jenny in 2013. I have visited the house on a number of occasions and it is incredibly impressive. The house is based on the Passivhaus energy design standard developed in Germany and is designed to provide a high level of comfort, while using very little energy for heating and cooling. Colin and Jenny's home features triple glazing, LED lighting and an air source heat pump. It costs less than £70 for a year's supply of energy for heating, lighting, hot water and cooking. It is inspirational and I think we are all quite shocked to hear that figure, but it shows that it can be done and, with political will, the Government could make that happen at scale.

The issues we are debating today are incredibly urgent. I hope that the Minister will come forward with a clear commitment and set out how the Government intend to step up to this challenge.

3.16 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had a good and important debate this afternoon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on bringing forward the debate and on the exemplary way in which he put forward his case. I largely agree with what he said, particularly his emphasis on conditions in homes in the north of England and the work we need to do on retrofitting. He gave a number of instances of homes in the north of England and their circumstances, particularly the average age of properties, and the fact that it is rather colder up north than it is down south—I say that as the Member for Southampton, Test.

In the north of England, property stock is substantially older than the average for the UK and, as the hon. Member for Darlington mentioned, that older stock is substantially single-skinned properties, which need different forms of treatment from properties with cavity wall insulation. From energy efficiency surveys, it is interesting to see that pre-1930s properties have a median energy efficiency score of 56, according to the report I am looking at, whereas buildings built from 2012 onwards have a median energy efficiency score of over 80. So we have a huge block of properties in the north of England that have very low energy efficiency scores, and it is difficult to do anything about them other than provide whole-house treatment for the amelioration of their problems.

Bearing in mind that issue, we also have a huge gap between the emissions from new build properties and those from existing dwellings. Indeed, the north-east

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

has one of the largest gaps between emissions from new and old properties. In the north-east, there are emissions of just over 1.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year from a new property, compared with over twice that amount—3.6 tonnes per year—for existing properties. So there is a huge job to be done, particularly in properties in the north of England, to help us get to our net zero targets and to retrofit properties throughout the country.

The call from the hon. Member for Darlington for much more work to be done on the energy retrofit of properties is important for climate change purposes and for future energy bills. It is estimated that £400 to £500 can be saved from energy bills in an uprated energy-efficient property. It is also important for the comfort and good living that we expect in any household in the country. The problem relating to damp and older properties is not just in his part of the world, but in the north generally. This debate is timely and important, and we must have the retrofit debate in the not too distant future.

I cannot be entirely non-political in this debate, as the hon. Member suggested we should be, although we all agree in this Chamber on what we want to do with retrofitted properties and on why it is important and relevant to climate change, fuel poverty and the welfare of citizens.

Peter Gibson: I am pleased to hear the tone of the hon. Gentleman's speech up to this point. Although the debate is focused on the north and north-east, and on the types of housing stock in my constituency and other northern constituencies, I am sure that the type of housing stock in his own constituency—perhaps he will mention that—would benefit from some of the improvements, even though his constituency is on the south coast.

Dr Whitehead: I can assure the hon. Member that I am not approaching this debate as if all the retrofit problems are in the north of England and not in the south. It is a national scandal that homes across the UK have got some of the worst energy efficiency performances of any properties in Europe. On other occasions the Minister has said that it is not such a big problem because of the way in which energy efficiency has increased in our housing overall in the last few years.

However, if we look at all parts of the country, there is a big lag between the energy efficiency, albeit under slightly different circumstances, across the country and the energy efficiency of new properties, so the figures do not quite tell the truth as far as energy efficiency improvement is concerned. Most of that improvement is because newer housing, recently built properties, are so much more energy-efficient than older properties. In fact, as we can see from the collapse of energy efficiency retrofit arrangements after 2012, there has not been a great deal of movement in the energy efficiency of properties in all parts of the country. The north of England faces even worse problems in getting its property up to retrofit standards than other parts of the country.

Peter Gibson: All of us in this Chamber have alluded to the scale and size of the problem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is also a really complex problem because of the types of ownership of some of

our properties? We are not talking about just one type of ownership. There are private landlords, social housing providers, absentee landlords and private homeowners, which makes the problem particularly complex. As we have so much time remaining in the debate, I would be incredibly grateful to the hon. Gentleman if he could outline some of his suggestions and proposals to tackle the problem.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Member invites me to make a lengthy speech about what my party has in mind for energy retrofit, but also about what my party has in mind for dealing with complex situations in different sectors of the housing market. He rightly says that the question of energy efficiency standards is very different in different tenures of property—social housing, private rented sector and owner-occupied housing—and the solutions that one needs to put forward have to be different for different kinds of tenure. Furthermore, as I am sure the hon. Member has noticed, those tenures are intermixed with each other in most areas, so there are very few parts of the country where there is just one kind of tenure.

In my constituency, one of the issues is that there is a very high level of houses in multiple occupation and properties that are rented out by private landlords. There is also a substantial student population in my city, so a number of the houses are rented out by private landlords on a quick turnover, and with very little regard for the energy efficiency of those properties in the long term. Although one might say that the general housing arrangements in my city are better for energy efficiency than in some other parts of the country, there are specific issues relating to how energy efficiency might be looked at. One issue is just how bad energy efficiency is in the private rented sector and what measures need to be undertaken to get those houses to a decent level of energy efficiency in order to make them marketable rental properties.

In the past, a specific part of the legislation was on minimum energy efficiency standards. We think that needs to go a lot further by addressing the marketability of homes and the requirement on landlords to get those properties up to a decent energy efficiency level in order to rent them out in the first place. As the hon. Member for Darlington will know, there is legislation in place that requires landlords to bring their properties up to the band E energy efficiency requirement, but that is grossly insufficient for the targets that we need to set on getting the private rented sector up to scratch with energy efficiency.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's indulgence in giving way a third time, and for him talking about putting the burden of meeting those property costs on some of our landlords. We have seen examples of landlords being forced to do some of the work that is required to bring their properties up to standard. As a result, they are exiting the market—some people might say that is a good thing—and then selling the properties, which is having a deflationary impact on the value of properties in specific localities. In turn, that compounds the problem of the ratio between the cost and value of the asset and the cost and value of the investment required, which can actually have the opposite effect to the one desired.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman is admirably setting out a series of concerns about how we address the process of retrofitting, which we need to think about very carefully. One of the things that concerns me—here I get a bit political—is just how bad the Government’s overall retrofit programme has been over a long period. It is not just about the collapse of schemes from 2012 onwards. In the previous debate, somebody asked what happened in energy during the previous Labour Government. Well, a lot happened: the carbon emissions reduction target, the community energy saving programme and warm home grants.

There has been a real noticeable increase in standard assessment procedure ratings in properties over the years. From about 1990 to 1995-96, the schemes really started working, and they were publicly funded. What happened in 2012 is that the publicly funded schemes were removed, and after that the schemes were entirely market based. The green deal died a death. Recently, the green homes grant was sort of publicly funded, but it also rapidly died a death.

Significantly—I want to emphasise this point, in terms of how we treat retrofit—the only part of the green homes grant that was successful was the part that applied to local authorities. Local authorities were and are able to take some of that grant and do a lot of good work. The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) said that his local authority has done a lot of public work on that, yet the Government systematically set their face against the idea that local authorities can play a substantial leading role in retrofitting.

I suggest—the hon. Member for Darlington and I spoke about this a moment ago—that the case has overwhelmingly been made for retrofit funding. We are saying that there should be a 10-year programme to retrofit 19 million homes of all tenures through a combination of loans, grants and direct local authority schemes, with two million homes retrofitted immediately. That would be a comprehensive programme of retrofitting across the country, with the emphasis on area-based schemes so that local authorities can look at where their areas are worst and at what needs to be done in their particular circumstances, and concentrate resources accordingly on retrofitting with that knowledge and those concerns at the front of their minds. How much better would that be than the sorts of schemes we have had over the years? In this case, energy companies have been asked to go around and pick out individual properties to do up to a greater or lesser extent.

Paul Howell: I declare an interest: I am a private landlord. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in terms of segmenting the approach and trying to make sure it is right, we need a different approach when considering the economics of the north, for landlords and owners, in contrast to the high-value property areas of the country, to ensure that we focus on absentee landlords and people who are not doing the right thing? In parts of the north they almost walk away because the value of the property is so low. We need to ensure that does not result in the properties becoming derelict. Rather, they should either be resold or go back into the rental market properly.

Dr Whitehead: I agree with the hon. Member that we need to ensure that we tailor our programmes, not just to the particular areas of the country but to the particular

resources that we will need in order to deal with the arrangements in different parts of the country. Labour’s programme would not only allow that to happen, but ensure that, right across the country, we were not applying a one-size-fits-all arrangement and we were allowing local authorities in particular to tailor their programmes. We can imagine the equivalent of the old housing improvement areas or general improvement areas being applied in the form of energy efficiency improvement areas in various local authority areas. They would be chosen by those local authorities, and would be able to concentrate on different tenures in the way that the hon. Gentleman outlined. The difference is like night and day between what Labour is proposing at the moment and what the Government—albeit they have spent some money on retrofitting—continue to try to do.

I just want to take a few more minutes, because I appreciate that we will in the end run out of time—even though we have more time than we thought—and I want to give the Minister ample time to reply to the debate. I would like him to address his thoughts to three particular questions.

One of the only schemes that is doing any serious work on retrofitting at the moment is ECO—the energy company obligation. The ECO scheme is now in its fourth iteration; ECO4 was supposed to come onstream in April this year, and the hon. Member for Darlington asked, “Where is ECO?” There is an answer in the press release for the Energy Security Bill that appeared on my desk today. That press release states:

“The current ECO4 scheme came into force in June 2022 and will run until March 2026.”

That is just not true. No ECO4 scheme is in operation at the moment, because the regulations have not yet been sorted out as far as this House is concerned; we still have to discuss them and put them into being. Today, I was at a lunch where an energy management and building company guy sitting next to me was bemoaning the fact that the people there could not just get on with ECO4 because they just do not know what is going to happen with the regulations.

Therefore my first question to the Minister is this. When will that happen so that we really can get under way with ECO4? Why has he put it in the Energy Security Bill that ECO4 has already started when it has not? Can he get it started as soon as possible so that the people I have been talking to recently can actually have some security about the future arrangements for retrofit? We obviously consider that the uprating for ECO4 that has already taken place, from £750 million to £1 billion, is welcome but not enough. Certainly we would want to see that programme substantially increased in size at a very early stage in order to get this retrofit programme going as quickly as possible.

The second question is this. Why is there nothing in the Energy Security Bill—as far as I can see—that takes us beyond the level of ECO4? Certain things in the Bill suggest some amendments to ECO4, but there is nothing to take us beyond that particular scheme in the way that has been described today in this Chamber. I do not know whether the Minister—because I suspect that the Energy Security Bill is a Bill in progress even as it is published—will want to bring forward amendments, during the passage of the Bill, that allow those further things to take place, but I will be interested to know this afternoon whether that is under serious consideration.

[Dr Whitehead]

As I think every Member present this afternoon has said, this is a pressing problem that needs to be sorted out as quickly as possible, and on the widest scale that is compatible with our net zero commitment and the duty we have towards our citizens' style of living, energy bills and expectations of what their housing will look like in future years. Pushing forward on that is something we in this Chamber are completely united on, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to that unity of purpose.

3.40 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on securing this important debate. As ever, it is excellent to have so much good representation in the north of England from our party.

This Government's unwavering commitment to decarbonise the country's 30 million buildings has the welfare of those who most need energy-efficient homes at its very core. Getting to net zero is not just a legal commitment; it is the right policy for this and future generations. Improving the wellbeing and living conditions of northern communities is a key part of the levelling up of all our towns, cities and regions as we build a green Britain that works for every part of the country.

Underpinning all our work in that area is the heat and buildings strategy, a copy of which I have brought to this debate, published at the end of October 2021. It explores different options for low-carbon heating, from hydrogen trials to heat networks and increased use of heat pumps, to meet the challenges of each region of our country, recognising that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach.

At the same time, we are taking a fabric-first approach to retrofit, ensuring that emissions are reduced first, regardless of how buildings are heated. That will be supported through a commitment to invest £6.6 billion during this Parliament, which is funding technology trials and capital schemes such as the home upgrade grant and the boiler upgrade scheme. In the past year alone, we have committed more than £1.3 billion to domestic retrofitting schemes, which was one of the central points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington and, indeed, other Members.

We have prioritised the worst performing low-income homes to receive measures such as external wall insulation and clean heating systems. That has already lifted thousands of households out of fuel poverty, and future phases of home decarbonisation will upgrade over half a million more. Families who would not be able to afford energy efficiency improvements for themselves will be able to face future winters knowing that they will be warm, sometimes for the first time.

Our local authority delivery scheme and home upgrade grant empower local authorities, which know their communities and housing stock best, to decarbonise local homes according to specific needs. In the north, around £226 million of funding has been allocated to local areas through the latest phases of those schemes. As many Members have said, the north of England has benefited disproportionately from the energy company

obligation. Since that scheme started under this Government in 2013, over 13% of homes in the north-west and over 12% of homes in the north-east have received energy efficiency measures. Indeed, 12.2% of households in Darlington have had their homes improved under the energy company obligation, compared with an average of 9% across Great Britain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, who is vice-chair of two relevant APPGs and knows the engineering heritage of his town so well, made an excellent speech. In researching it, he sat down with local housing providers such as North Star Housing, which quoted some striking sums regarding the costs of retrofitting a home relative to the value of that home. My hon. Friend made some thoughtful arguments about how we should evaluate the cost efficiency of those different measures. He also pointed out that 64% of properties in Darlington are rated below brackets A to C on energy efficiency, which shows that despite the progress we have made on energy efficiency—particularly over the past decade—there is still much work to do. That is why we are investing £6.6 billion over the course of this Parliament.

We had an intervention from the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who is not in her place anymore, to say two things. She attacked the Government's record on renewables, nuclear and energy efficiency. I found it startling, considering that when the last Labour Government started their period in office, they said that when it came to nuclear, they saw no economic case for new nuclear power stations in this country. That was at the start of their 13 years in office.

On renewables, we have taken the amount of energy generated from renewable sources since 2010 from 7% of the energy mix to 56%. That is an incredible increase in our renewable output as part of our energy mix.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is right that my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is not in her place, but would he not agree, or concede, that it was a Conservative Government that pulled the funding for solar on people's roofs, stymieing an industry and making it much more expensive for people to install solar? Precious years have been lost, and we could have had many more solar panels on our roofs.

Greg Hands: I fundamentally disagree. Solar has done incredibly well in this country. We have a big capacity in solar—I think around 14 GW. Our ambition is to grow that to 70 GW. Part of that is thanks to the VAT reduction that we saw this year. I do not remember the hon. Lady supporting that VAT reduction on solar panels. The Government are taking active measures to increase and support solar energy.

On energy efficiency, when we took office in 2010, just 14% of properties in England were rated "energy efficient". That has risen to 46%, which in 12 years is an incredible increase. However, that shows that 54% of our properties are still not sufficiently energy efficient, so we still have work to do, but we can only do it by making investment. The last Labour Government said there was no money left. Perhaps if they spent a little more on energy efficiency in those 13 years, we would not have been in a position where only 10% of homes were rated A to C when we took power.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington asked when the new energy company obligation scheme will begin. I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), also raised that same point. A three-month interim delivery phase was introduced between 1 April to 30 June 2022 under the previous scheme rules to enable delivery to continue subject to some measure limitations. Obligated suppliers may choose to deliver under the new scheme rules backdated to April 2022, when the underpinning legislation was put in place. We are pleased to announce that we laid the draft Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2022 before Parliament on 22 June. We expect the regulations to be made and come into force in July.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington also asked about energy advice. Our simple energy advice service, launched in 2018 in response to the Government-commissioned “Each Home Counts” review, provides homeowners with impartial and tailored advice on how to cut their energy bills and make their homes greener. The service has been accessed by over a million users.

Dr Whitehead *rose—*

Greg Hands: I will make some progress and respond to the points made in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington and the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) raised the really important point of skills. I chair the newly established green jobs delivery group with Michael Lewis, CEO of E.ON UK. In 2021 the Government invested £6 million in a BEIS skills training competition, resulting in 7,000 more training places for heat pumps and insulation. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale also commended an event about skills attended by Andy Burnham and Andy Street. It is good to see constructive cross-party work. I only wish that the Mayor of London would follow such a constructive approach to cross-party work, as the Mayors for Manchester and Birmingham often do.

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) asked about using legitimate builders, not cowboys. All insulations under Government schemes, including ECO, the social housing decarbonisation fund, the home upgrade grant and the local authority delivery scheme, must be completed by TrustMark-registered businesses, adhering to the latest requisite standards. These requirements are based on the recommendation of the “Each House Counts” review, an independent review of consumer protections and standards.

Navendu Mishra *rose—*

Greg Hands: If the hon. Gentleman has a specific case in mind, I would urge him to take that up with the local authority trading standards.

In an excellent contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) mentioned fuel poverty, which is actually falling in this country. Last year, it accounted for 13.2% of English households and this year it accounts for 12.5%. Obviously, that is not satisfactory, and we need to keep bearing down on fuel poverty, but that situation is improving. I am glad that he welcomed my ministerial colleague, Lord Callanan, to the north-east; he leads the ministerial team on energy efficiency.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield and for Darlington referred to retrofitting, as did other hon. Members. Our £1.8 million green home finance innovation fund, which completed in March 2022, was a key early step in supporting the lending community to design, develop and pilot green finance products for homeowners. The Government will provide up to a further £20 million to support the development of innovative green finance products and services that will diversify the green finance market and enable both owner-occupiers and private landlords to decarbonise their homes and improve thermal comfort.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield asked about VAT. We have introduced a zero-rating VAT for the installation of insulation and low-carbon heating for the next five years, which will give real certainty to the market. That will save between £1,000 and £2,000 on the cost of an air-source heat pump. My hon. Friend also raised the private rented sector, and I can tell him that we consulted on raising the standard to EPC band C for new tenancies from 1 April 2025, and for all tenancies by 1 April 2028. We have analysed the responses and we will be publishing a Government response in due course. In the meantime, we will continue to invest in energy efficiency and support homeowners outside such regulations. We also published the White Paper “A fairer private rented sector” on 16 June 2022, which sets out support for those in the private rented sector, including ending so-called “no fault” section 21 evictions, and giving all tenants a strong right of redress.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) asked whether we will give money to local regions, such as Liverpool City Council, to retrofit. I can tell her that phase 2 of the local authority delivery scheme allocated £300 million to the five local net zero hubs, which will work with their local authorities to continue to deliver energy efficiency upgrades to up to 30,000 homes across England to those most in need. In this Parliament £6.6 million has been spent on energy efficiency, and a great deal of that has been assigned to local authorities via the home upgrade grant, the LAD scheme and the social housing decarbonisation fund. In LAD 2 funding, the regional allocation of £52.8 million is going to the north-west—the hon. Lady’s region.

The hon. Lady also asked about new-build homes being built to passive housing standards to create lower bills. On new build, the Government have announced that the new future homes standard will be introduced from 2025. That work is ongoing, and in the interim an improvement to part of the loft building regulations came into effect on 15 June 2022.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale asked about training providers and businesses. As I have already said, we have invested £6 million in the BEIS skills training competition, resulting in more than 7,000 training opportunities.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test lauded the big increase in energy efficiency across the country. I think he argued that the figures are due to the better energy efficiency of new homes. We are not looking at an average figure—the increase from 14% to 46% of the housing stock—rather we are looking at the percentage of the total number of homes that are rated A to C. The fact that a new home will be particularly, staggeringly, energy efficient will only count as one home in the denominator. The key thing is moving homes in the

[Greg Hands]

numerator to make sure that more new homes are created energy efficient and that older homes are retrofitted to get them into the A to C bracket.

The hon. Gentleman asked what the Government are doing to support consumer bills. The Government have acted to protect the 8 million most vulnerable British families through a £37 billion package of support to help those households with the cost of living crisis. That includes at least £1,200 of direct payments this year, with additional support for pensioners and those claiming disability benefits. Three quarters of the total support will go to the vulnerable households who need the most help.

Later this year, the social housing decarbonisation fund is due to launch its second wave of funding to 2025, from the £800 million committed in the heat and buildings strategy to install energy efficiency measures in social homes. The first wave of that funding is investing £63 million in retrofitting around 8,000 homes in the north of England.

Improving the wellbeing and living conditions of northern communities is a key element of the levelling-up agenda that we have embedded across all Departments, with the ambition that by 2030 the number of non-decent rented homes will have fallen by 50%, with the biggest improvements in the lowest performing areas. We know there are significant regional variations in emission levels and communities will face different challenges when meeting net zero commitments. The north accounts for around a quarter of the UK's emissions, so it is well placed to make a huge contribution to UK decarbonisation.

As Government-funded energy efficiency work rolls out in the coming years, there will be a need to scale up the supply chain and build a skilled workforce, which will take time. To meet that long-term challenge, we have provided £4.7 million of funding to test how we can grow the installer supply chain and a further £2.5 billion in a national skills fund, helping to support hundreds of thousands of green jobs.

The north is in a key position at the centre of net zero innovation, growth and opportunities for green jobs. For example, the new Lancashire Energy HQ, part of Blackpool and The Fylde College provides state-of-the-art training for excellence in energy standards; it was good to hear an intervention earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). Centres like that may provide job and skill development opportunities for many in communities benefiting from our domestic retrofit programmes. In fact, we expect the decarbonisation of buildings to support up to 240,000 jobs by 2035, resulting in £10 billion additional gross added value by 2035.

In my Department, we know that we need to remove virtually all emissions from buildings to reach net zero. We also know that we have a duty to protect those who are most vulnerable, and to support consumers and businesses as we decarbonise our buildings. I want to ensure that consumers will benefit from higher energy performance in homes and workplaces, from improved health and comfort and from lower emissions and lower bills. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington for proposing this excellent and well-informed debate.

3.57 pm

Peter Gibson: It is a pleasure to follow the Minister, and I thank him for his response to today's debate. It has been a healthy debate. We heard some great speeches from my hon. Friend, neighbour and constituent the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), the hon. Members for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), although I was disappointed to not actually hear the meat and drink of Labour's plans to tackle the problem.

We had interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who gave me the great line that tackling this problem is a "win-win-win-win-win" situation. We also had a deeply political intervention from the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who is no longer in her place.

It is clear that the Minister understands the challenges of our housing stock—the energy, retrofitting, disruption and lost income costs and the energy wastage—but also sees the benefits of warm homes, less leakage, improved health, skills and jobs that tackling this problem will bring. It was wonderful to hear the progress that has been made over the last 10 years, taking us from 14% to 46% of homes having an energy performance certificate of C or better, but let us accelerate that and make sure this is a win for the environment, homes, bill payers, jobs and skills.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered energy efficiency of homes in the north of England.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. The mover of the motion for the next debate is not here. I will give him a couple of minutes, but I will otherwise have to suspend the sitting until 4.30 pm.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended.

Gynaecological Services: Waiting Lists

4.30 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered waiting lists for gynaecological services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I start by thanking the many women who have contacted me about this issue, whether in my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis or as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh. The APPG on women's health has been in contact, and we have also received testimony through the House services from so many women raising their concerns about gynaecological treatment. I thank the Minister for still being in his place to respond to me at the end of today's debate—it is appreciated.

The debate will focus on the length of waiting lists for gynaecological treatment, and the amount of time people spend on those lists. It has been prompted by the findings of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists report, "Left for too long: understanding the scale and impact of gynaecology waiting lists". However, I remind Members that when we talk about statistics, it is easy to forget the real people who lie behind them—those individual lives—who do not exist in isolation. When people's health is impacted, it impacts their families, their friends, their communities and their work. As we will hear, the length of waiting lists is prolonging the suffering of tens of thousands of women, and that suffering has physical, economic and emotional costs.

Gynaecological waiting lists across the UK have now reached a combined figure of more than 610,000—a 69% increase on pre-pandemic levels. An observer might say, "Well, of course. There's been covid, there's been a pandemic—what do you expect?" The total pausing of elective care at the start of the covid pandemic has, of course, had an impact. That observer might add, "Our NHS has been chronically underfunded for the past 12 years. There was a steady increase in waiting lists even before the pandemic, and the 18-week waiting time standard for planned elective care has not been met since 2016, so why are you just having a debate on gynaecological treatments? Why not have a debate on waiting lists in general?"

The answer is that RCOG's analysis shows that gynaecology waiting lists in England have seen the largest percentage growth of all elective specialities, and the largest percentage increase in patients waiting over 18 weeks from referral to treatment. The number of women waiting over a year for care has increased from just 66 in February 2020 to nearly 29,000 two years later, at the end of April 2022—the highest number ever recorded. Concerted efforts across the NHS to focus on longer waiters—that is, patients who have been waiting over a year—have resulted in a drop across all specialities combined from the peak in 2021. However, for gynaecology procedures, the numbers are going in the opposite direction: while we are seeing a reduction in waiting over a year for other treatments, we are not seeing the same for gynaecological treatment.

In addition, we have the prospect of even more cases in the pipeline. Analysis by Lane Clark and Peacock's health analytics team on behalf of RCOG shows that between March 2020 and November 2021, more than

400,000 women who were expected to join the waiting list based on referrals in previous years did not do so. Therefore, those people are missing from the data I have just mentioned. The number of missing referrals tended to be higher in areas where the waiting lists were already larger. Perhaps that means that women in areas with longer waiting lists are, coincidentally, not going to their GPs, or perhaps it is because they are not able to see their GPs, or their GPs are not responding to those longer waiting lists. We are not quite sure what is going on, but what we do know is that lots of women are not getting the treatment they need.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis and chair of the APPG on surgical mesh. Both come under the heading of gynaecological conditions, and both are being impacted by increased waiting times. Endometriosis is the second most common gynaecological condition. It impacts around 1.5 million women—one in 10—in the UK and can affect all women and girls of childbearing age. It is caused by cells that usually form part of the womb lining growing elsewhere in the body, but they still react to the monthly cycle of hormones that regulate a woman's period. That can create extreme pain and fatigue, because the cells are growing in completely the wrong place.

Part of the APPG's role is to raise awareness of the condition and get people to talk about it. One in 10 women have it, but I am not sure that one in 10 people in the country know anything about the condition or the fact that it even exists. Many of the sufferers are facing increased waiting time for the procedures I am highlighting today. Even pre-pandemic, people were waiting on average seven and a half years for a diagnosis.

I want to quickly mention surgical mesh, because tomorrow is the second anniversary of the report "First Do No Harm", which was commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), and undertaken by Baroness Cumberlege, to look at the condition. Surgical mesh was used in the surgical repair of pelvic organ prolapse and to manage stress urinary incontinence. It was promised to be simple and quick, but for some it has resulted in severe complications, including chronic pain, infections, reduced mobility, sexual difficulties and autoimmune issues. Lives have been shattered and the issue of mesh injury, along with the scandal surrounding hormone pregnancy, resulted in the "First Do No Harm" report.

Women have been left disabled by the mesh treatments. One of the key recommendations of the report, which, to the shame of this Government, are still not fully implemented two years on, was the establishment of specialist mesh treatment centres. Some of these have opened, but they are beset with problems over access, waiting times and cancellations. Through my involvement with these centres, I have heard at first hand the testimony of so many women whose lives have been blighted by what are currently referred to in the NHS as "benign" conditions. Yet, as we have heard, these conditions can be so painful and debilitating that they impact on every aspect of family, social and work life.

One lady, Kelly, said:

"The impact the long waiting lists have on my life is horrendous. I have endometriosis and adenomyosis and the daily pain these conditions cause me is terrible. Some days simple tasks like

[Emma Hardy]

walking are unbearable. I have been on the waiting list for surgery for my endometriosis since 2019, and the length of time I am currently having to wait and the symptoms I am having to deal with daily are massively affecting every aspect of my life and having a profound effect on my mental health. I have been told that despite going on the waiting list for surgery in 2019 I will likely be waiting 4 years to get my surgery. Every day is a struggle.”

These conditions are not benign and cannot wait.

“Benign” suggests that there is no harm in delaying treatment, but that is emphatically not the case. For both endometriosis and mesh injury, longer waiting times can have a significant impact on progression. As time passes, options narrow, opportunities are lost and surgery becomes more lengthy and complex. Mental health deteriorates and depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts become more common.

This is borne out by the most recent data from RCOG. Nearly three quarters of the members surveyed felt that they were seeing women with more complex care and treatment needs as a result of waiting longer for care, resulting in worsening and often extremely debilitating symptoms. Four fifths of the women surveyed reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted while waiting for care. So why are the waiting lists for gynaecological treatments growing? Is it the lack of priority they have been given simply because they are considered benign and not a threat to life? Or is it because gynaecological treatment is the only elective treatment unique to women?

There is undeniably a problem with the health service’s attitudes, in some places, to women’s health, where it involves reported symptoms and the voice of the patients themselves. I stress that I continue to give my wholehearted to the medical profession and everything it does, but there seems to be a concern particularly around the treatment of women’s health conditions.

“First Do No Harm” contains a section headed, “‘No-one is listening’—The patient voice dismissed”. In this case, “patient” is synonymous with “woman”. Although the following passage from the report refers to “mesh complications”, it applies equally to any other gynaecological condition. The report, published two years ago tomorrow, says:

“Women, in reporting to us their extensive mesh complications, have spoken of excruciating chronic pain feeling like razors inside their body, damage to organs, the loss of mobility and sex life and depression and suicidal thoughts. Some clinicians’ reactions ranged from ‘it’s all in your head’ to ‘these are women’s issues’ or ‘it’s that time of life’ wherein anything and everything women suffer is perceived as a natural precursor to, part of, or a post-symptomatic phase of, the menopause. For the women concerned this was tantamount to a complete denial of their concerns and being written off by a system that was supposed to care.”

Amatullah said:

“My GP actually laughed at me when I initially expressed concern that my condition was worsening despite my family history. I had to be hospitalised with suspected appendicitis before I was taken seriously enough to have more testing to see if my fibroids had grown. They had doubled in one year.”

Joanna said:

“As a newly qualified junior doctor, who hopes to specialise in gynaecology, I can’t stress enough how important this debate is. For too long, women’s pain has been ignored or dismissed. The topic is considered taboo despite it being something that a significant percentage of women experience.”

Do such attitudes reflect the prioritisation of gynaecological procedures? The facts certainly point to its neglect in comparison with other procedures. In the RCOG report, both the women and the RCOG members surveyed describe the way in which gynaecological conditions were perceived and prioritised as one of the biggest barriers to reducing the length of the wait time.

I want to quickly mention the data that I was sent from the APPG on women’s health. This is from its “Informed Choice” report of 2017. The APPG’s survey of 2,600 women showed that 42% were not treated with dignity and respect; 62% were not satisfied with the information that they received about treatment options; and nearly 50% of women with fibroids and endometriosis were not told about the short or long-term complications from their treatment. That information is from 2017, so we cannot put all that down to the pandemic. I hate to say this, but there is a problem with people’s attitudes to women’s health when it involves reported symptoms and the voice of patients.

When the Government finally publish their women’s health strategy—something the Labour party has been calling for since 2019—they should include an investigation into possible gender bias in the prioritisation of gynaecological services, and an end to the use of the term “benign gynaecology” to describe gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids and polycystic ovary syndrome. There needs to be a shift in the way gynaecology is prioritised as a speciality across the health service. I understand that the RCOG is keen to engage on that with the NHS in all four regions.

I have given a few examples, but there are so many more. I really was inundated with testimonies from women ahead of this debate. There were so many cases and examples of the terrible effects that a prolonged wait for treatment can have. The prioritisation of care as part of NHS recovery must look beyond clinical need and consider the wider impacts on patients waiting for care. There must be a significant re-think in the development of a prioritisation framework for recovery that considers the impact of ongoing symptoms on an individual’s physical and mental health, their quality of life, their fertility, and their ability to participate in work, family and social life.

The RCOG has offered to work with stakeholders across all surgical specialties and the NHS to look at what the framework could look like in practice. We have an unequal growth of gynaecological waiting lists compared with other specialties, and that must be addressed as a matter of urgency. We have seen that there is in all likelihood a huge reservoir of unreferral cases, which will only worsen an already unacceptable situation. The RCOG is seeking a national ringfenced budget for recovery and long-term sustainability of elective gynaecology, with national funding to support local solutions. We obviously need to focus that funding on areas with the longest waiting lists and where disparities are greatest.

The NHS in each nation should commit to tracking and publishing progress on reducing disparities in elective waiting lists. The Government must use the women’s health strategy to commit to mandating co-commissioning of sexual and reproductive healthcare, removing the barriers for services outside of hospitals to support women in their communities.

Finally, Conservative Governments have presided over more than a decade of underfunding in our NHS, and that must be addressed. RCOG members were very clear that staffing is the biggest barrier to reducing waiting lists in outpatient settings and in theatre, and to increasing the number of beds. In March, unfilled posts across health services in England rose to more than 110,000, including nearly 40,000 nurses and over 8,000 doctors. Yet nearly 800 medical undergraduates who applied to start training as junior doctors at the start of August this year have been told that there are no places for them—that is the highest number ever. And despite an increase in applications for nursing degrees this year, the number of applicants remains below that of 2016, which incidentally was the last time that a bursary was available to financially support student nurses before it was scrapped.

The answers to gynaecological waiting lists lie in front of us. However, without the necessary action from Government and the funding to increase staff numbers, there will be no sustainable solution to reducing them. Instead, the Government are content to let the NHS limp along, understaffed, overstretched and with record waiting lists and the personal suffering and wider damage to society that they bring.

4.45 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I will not detain hon. Members long with my speech, but I do want to say how grateful I am to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this important debate and what a privilege it is to follow her excellent contribution. So much of what she said about waiting causing harm and the attitude of health services to women I will echo in my speech, because today I want to talk about waiting lists for women who need hysteroscopy.

The thing that I want to emphasise today is that many of those women are having to make a terrible choice—a Hobson's choice. Either they have that really important procedure—it will determine their health prospects—as soon as they need it and without an anaesthetic, or they can wait and wait and wait until an anaesthetist and a theatre are available. I have now spoken about the issue of painful hysteroscopy in the House nine times, trying desperately to get Ministers to secure a change in the behaviour of the NHS towards women. And every time I speak, more and more women contact me afterwards to tell me about the brutalisation that they have experienced. The stories never stop. Although I am assured by Ministers that action is being taken, will be taken and so on, the stories just go on.

I will share just two stories today. Had I known that only my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and I would be here on the Back Benches, I would have brought more—because I love to watch a Minister squirm—but I have only two stories with me today.

I want to talk about Emily, who is in her 70s. She gave birth twice—once without pain relief, after a very long labour. Therefore, we are talking about a woman who can cope with a certain level of pain without difficulty. When Emily, who is, I repeat, in her 70s, had her hysteroscopy, she was not offered any pain relief, and her procedure was excruciatingly painful. The word that

she uses and that many, many women who have written to me use also is “brutal”. The pain was so bad that Emily, in her 70s, passed out. It is appalling, and every single person sitting in this room and watching from home knows that. Emily should have been given the decent, fair choice of having the procedure with an effective anaesthetic and without having to wait months.

We all know that hysteroscopies can be absolutely essential to investigate and diagnose serious medical conditions. But frankly, given the state of the NHS at the moment, women are in effect told to tolerate no pain relief or wait months. That is not acceptable. It means week after week of waiting while knowing that they may have a cancer. It is not acceptable to give them the choice of either having the procedure without pain relief or waiting months to have it with pain relief. They remain undiagnosed and untreated for months.

Imagine being one of the increasing number of women who are aware that hysteroscopy could cause, or has caused, them horrific pain and lasting trauma. Imagine having to wait to make a decision about the diagnostic tool. Imagine what it is like waiting. Imagine having to make that decision.

Let me highlight the pressure that women are under by talking about Francesca. Francesca was referred for a hysteroscopy after experiencing heavy bleeding, but the procedure was so painful that she asked the consultant to stop halfway through. These stories go on and on in the same vein—women begging for procedures to stop and being ignored. In that instance, shamefully, the consultant made light of Francesca's discomfort, making her believe that she was making a fuss about nothing.

As it turned out, Francesca had pre-cancerous cells in the lining of her womb, and she required a follow-up procedure. This time, she insisted that she was given a general anaesthetic. The consultant's response to that totally reasonable request made Francesca believe that she was asking for the impossible. The consultant warned Francesca that delaying her appointment could increase her risk. Francesca knew—we all know—that leaving cancerous cells untreated is truly dangerous, and having asked for pain relief from the chronically underfunded NHS, she believed that she was guilty of asking for something that she could not and should not have. She felt belittled and bullied, and she was terrified, so she gave in and agreed to have the procedure without the pain relief that she needed. That is so obviously wrong.

Women should not have to choose between their basic right not to suffer avoidable pain and their right to decent, prompt and respectful treatment from our NHS. They should have an anaesthetist there and a range of effective anaesthetics, so that the women are given a real choice. I beg this Government finally to understand that that cannot go on any longer. The NHS needs to be funded to create the capacity, so that women get the treatment they need in time and free from pain. They need to be treated with dignity because, frankly, what is the point of the Government's women's health strategy if it cannot even do that?

4.53 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this important

[Feryal Clark]

debate and for her continued advocacy of this issue and many issues affecting health inequality, which predominantly affects women. I praise the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who set out some harrowing stories of women undergoing hysteroscopy, such as Emily and Francesca, who are ignored and brushed aside. We know that there are thousands more Emilys and Francescas.

That is why the debate is so vital—not just because of the need for meaningful progress on the long-promised women's health strategy, but because fundamentally we are discussing issues that affect more than 50% of the population. Too often women's health is pigeon-holed as niche and as a subsection of healthcare. The idea that gynaecological conditions are manageable for long periods of time, and can be deprioritised as a result, is just not acceptable.

Let me set out what that deprioritisation means. It means endometriosis surgery being delayed five times, resulting in irreversible fertility loss, and severe chronic pain. That perception must change, and women must be given the access to healthcare that they desperately need. Any other area of public policy that affected more than half of the population would not be treated in that way, and quite frankly, women have had enough.

We know that timely access to healthcare matters to women, and to young women in particular—the Government's consultation on women's health strategy tells us so. Gynaecological conditions were the No.1 topic chosen by women under 30, yet they are being consistently let down and made to wait day after day, year after year. Waiting lists are spiralling in all parts of the NHS, with records being broken consistently, but in gynaecology those spiralling lists are having a disproportionate impact. As we have heard, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has found that gynaecological waiting lists across the UK have now reached 610,000—an increase of more than 106% since 2008. That backlog is made worse by significant geographic disparities in care.

Waiting lists are growing across the country: there has been an 89% rise in the north-west; a 97% increase in the midlands; and a 144% increase in the east of England. That means that the chance of getting what little care is available is down to a complete postcode lottery. That is disgraceful.

In my own clinical commissioning group area, north central London, the situation is absolutely dire. There are more than 10,000 women on the gynaecological waiting list, and 311 of them have been waiting for over a year. That not only puts pressure on gynaecological services, but has a knock-on effect on the rest of the NHS. Since 2010, emergency admissions for endometriosis have increased by 87%. Women are in A&E for ruptured cysts after their appointments and surgery are cancelled.

If women were listened to, and the services that they rely on were properly resourced, we would not be where we are. For women, the waiting times are having an impact that is far wider than just on their physical health, as we heard from my hon. Friends. The RCOG survey also showed that 80% of women surveyed felt that their mental health had been negatively impacted

while waiting for care. If the problem is not tackled as a matter of urgency, the figures will only get worse and the impact will be more devastating.

Tinkering around the edges simply will not cut it. We need a fundamental rethink of how women's healthcare is treated. We are in a situation in which, in some cases, we do not even have basic frameworks and clinical guidance in place. For example, there is no National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on how polycystic ovary syndrome should be treated. Just 8% of women feel that they have sufficient information when it comes to gynaecological conditions. What practical steps will the Minister take to ensure that women have the information that they need to make informed decisions?

I am sure that the Minister will tell us that the Government have listened and that the women's health strategy will make a real change, but let us just look at how they have been listening. In the women's health strategy consultation only 0.5% of respondents were from the north or the midlands, and only 7% were from non-white backgrounds. A women's healthcare strategy that considers the experiences of only a small group of women will not be worth the paper it is written on. When it comes to gynaecology, the Government's own vision for the women's health strategy recognises that there is a problem. The unconscious bias that sees women's health less well served than those in other parts of the system, and consistently losing out and being deprioritised compared with other surgical specialties, must be challenged.

Can the Minister confirm today whether the strategy will be published before recess and will follow through on the issues identified in the vision document? Furthermore, will he include an action plan to ensure that the strategy does not just remain a plan but makes practical changes to the way healthcare is delivered for women? Women who are suffering day after day, as they are being made to wait, deserve action. I hope the Minister has heard the asks from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and for West Ham. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I would just say that if I am still in post on Sunday, I will be the third-longest serving Minister of State for Health since 1970, but only time will tell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate about waiting lists for gynaecological services. I know this is a very important subject for her, and I would like to take a moment to highlight her well-known focus in this House on women's health matters and the work she has done in that space, which reflects the importance many of our constituents attach to these issues.

As has been alluded to, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle has done important work on the suspension of the use of vaginal surgical mesh. She has also worked to promote menstrual wellbeing and worked with Endometriosis UK. I congratulate her on that. It is always a pleasure to answer a debate of hers or to respond to her in the Chamber. It is also a great pleasure to be able to respond to the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who as ever gave a typically powerful and forthright speech. She highlighted some

harrowing examples—as the shadow Minister put it—that illustrate the broader issues around hysteroscopy and particularly the challenges around the NHS listening and acknowledging patients' genuine concerns and requests. I will return to that in a moment. Normally at this point I would offer to meet with the hon. Member for West Ham to discuss this, but I will instead offer that the relevant Minister meet with her to discuss this matter further and the specific points she raised with her typical forthrightness and expertise.

The covid-19 pandemic has left a large backlog of people needing care. The latest figures show that 6.53 million people are waiting for NHS care, with 1.55 million of these waiting for diagnostic tests. As part of this, the waiting list for gynaecological services has over 28,800 people waiting longer than a year for care. We are working hard to reduce the number of people waiting for these vital services as swiftly as we can. It is promising that activity levels have reached 95% of their pre-pandemic levels in this area, but that is still 5% short of what normal activity would have been pre-pandemic. We recognise that more needs to be done in this space.

We are increasing capacity for gynaecological surgery to tackle long waits in two key areas: first, through surgical hubs, which allow for higher volumes of care to be carried out in protected circumstances, reducing the risk of covid-19 infections; and secondly, through the high-volume, low-complexity programme, which allows increased volumes of surgical procedures to be carried out. To support services further, we have grown the workforce in gynaecology with the addition of 108 consultants this year, bringing the total number working in obstetrics and gynaecology to over 6,400, an increase of 681 since 2019.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle rightly highlighted a number of key points, one being staffing and another being funding, which is also about facilities and their availability. That is why we increased funding by £33.9 billion in the legislation passed in early 2020 to reach a certain level by 2023-24, plus we provided additional funding throughout the pandemic. We recognise that there is a lot more to do.

The hon. Lady also talked about prioritisation and ringfencing. The only note of caution that I will set out about ringfencing particular parts of budgets is that often it is more effectively done by local clinical systems than by me or another Minister. Often those systems are best placed to work out what their priorities are, based on their waiting lists, population health and population need. I hope that integrated care systems will play an increasingly large role in understanding that, and adapting to the needs of local areas.

Turning to the women's health strategy, which I know is a central element of the way the Government propose to move forward. Across women's health we are working to deliver better care through the first women's health strategy for England, which will reset the way in which the Government are looking at women's health. That will correct the way in which the health system has in the past been set up—it is fair to say, although hon. Members may disagree—by men and for men. That is the historical evolution of our health service. Huge progress has been made, but there is more to do, which is why that focus is necessary.

Work on the strategy began in December 2021, when we published "Our Vision for the Women's Health Strategy for England". We announced in that vision

that we are appointing the first ever women's health ambassador for England. In June we announced the appointment of Dame Lesley Regan to that role. She will focus on raising the profile for women's health, increasing awareness of taboo topics, and bringing in a range of collaborative voices to implement the women's health strategy. To reassure the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, we do aim to publish the strategy before the summer recess. The relevant Minister will aim to do that.

Emma Hardy: When that is published, will it include the point I made about looking at whether there is a gender bias in the prioritisation of health treatment? That was something that the RCOG was really keen to emphasise. Everyone understands that covid meant waiting lists for everything. One of my key points was whether there is a gender bias? Is that partly why gynaecological treatment seems to be delayed more than others?

Edward Argar: I do not want to prejudge the specifics of that strategy. In broad terms, I hope that I can reassure the hon. Member that we are seeking to look at all the drivers of the challenges that she and other Members have highlighted, and seek to address improvements. Without prejudging, there are points made by hon. Members that I would expect to see included around information, engagement, guidance and empowerment. The importance of empowering women, believing them and engaging with them came through very clearly in the hon. Member for West Ham's comments.

Ms Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for what he is saying. It is about empowerment, but there is no empowerment when the choice is either to go for it now or to wait for months. Over and over, I have correspondence from women who are being belittled by those in gynaecological services, telling them not to make such a fuss "dear". That is despite the fact that getting up off the floor after something is often awful. I have had meetings with Ministers; what I really want is some action.

Edward Argar: I am grateful once again for the hon. Lady's typical forthrightness. I have debated with her on a number of occasions—I was going to say "crossed swords" but that is unfair—and I know that she means it with good intentions, even when she is being rightly firm with Ministers in pressing a case. She is absolutely right. When I talk about empowerment, I envisage that encompassing a whole range of things. That includes believing people, treating them with respect and listening to them.

In terms of action, one Opposition Member—forgive me; I do not remember who—mentioned the need for a clear delivery plan. I have been in the Department for almost three years now. Governments of all complexions are often very good at coming up with strategy documents, which are important. However, the key to whether they deliver the outcomes for all of our constituents is how we deliver and implement them on the ground. We have to get the strategy right; that is the first step and we anticipate publishing that before the summer recess. However, it is then important that we focus on delivery, and that we work not just with the NHS but with patients and relevant campaign groups to work out how we deliver on the intentions in that strategy.

[*Edward Argar*]

More generally, we set out in our elective recovery plan how we intend to build back from covid-19 and reduce waiting times across all elective services, including gynaecology and menstrual health. The plan included our commitment to tackling long waits, eradicating waits of longer than two years by the end of July 2022, and eliminating waits of over one year by March 2025. We will also ensure that 95% of patients waiting for a diagnostic test will receive it within six weeks by March 2025. To support that, we have committed to spend more than £8 billion from 2022-23 to 2024-25, in addition to the £2 billion elective recovery fund and the £700 million targeted investment fund already made available to systems.

That will hugely increase the capacity in the system. However—this also relates to the point made by the hon. Member for West Ham—one of the aims of the elective recovery plan, My Planned Care, and similar, is to increase, not just in the space of gynaecological services but more broadly, the opportunities for patients to exercise choice over whether they want something immediately or would prefer to wait, and potentially where they would prefer to have that procedure performed. We are continuing, through this, to try to build in more choice, not just for the patients—although that is crucial—but to help maximise the capacity within the system, to help avoid people having to wait longer than necessary.

Ms Brown: What research, if any, has the Minister done on hospital trusts, for instance, that might have people in a number of different geographical areas being served by a group of hospitals, and whether there is any real choice about which hospitals in those families people can elect to visit?

Edward Argar: The challenge that the hon. Lady poses is that if we are talking about, essentially, the multi-hospital trusts or similar, as they have grown up, they have often designed their services in x specialism in one hospital, and moved things around like that. In those cases, there are often only one or two hospitals within the trust that do it. We are seeking to try to create greater choice across the entire system, including regionally, which genuinely builds choice. That is a big challenge—Governments of both complexions have tried it with varying degrees of success—but that is what we are seeking to do here. However, there is a lot of work to do in that space. I hope that when she sees the strategy she will recognise the degree of underpinning research that has been done. It may not necessarily cover every point that she has focused on, but I hope she will recognise the amount of work that has been done.

Emma Hardy: I thank the Minister for again giving way. When we see the women's health strategy, will it respond to all of the recommendations from the Cumberlege review? We had a bit of an interim response to the review, but I am sure the Minister will be aware that there is still a cross-party campaign to ensure that all of those recommendations are fulfilled. If he ever does happen to find himself on the Back Benches, he is more than welcome to join any of my APPGs, and any of those campaigns, from a different side. I would be keen to know whether he is aware of any plans to fully address the report and fulfil those recommendations.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. She highlights an issue that I know has exercised Members on both sides of the House. Although progress has been made, I know that a campaign on other elements continues. This makes me sound as I used to occasionally, doing the morning media round and talking to Kay Burley or similar, but I do not want to prejudge what might be said in due course—that was sometimes a wise thing to say when discussing infection rates, restrictions or similar. I do not want to prejudge or predetermine what will be in that strategy, but I genuinely hope and believe that the hon. Lady will be pleased when she sees it. I would not for a moment expect her not to challenge it and seek to improve it, because I have worked and interacted with her before, and that is what Members do in this House. However, I hope that she will see progress in there.

We know that diagnostics are a key area in many gynaecological pathways. As such, we are establishing up to 160 community diagnostic centres across the country by 2025. There are currently 90 such centres operating across the country, including supporting spoke sites, and they have delivered 1 million tests and scans since July 2021. The expansion of the centres will mean that the NHS will have just shy of 38% more MRI capacity, 45% more CT capacity, 26.8% ultrasound capacity improvements, and an increase of around 19% in endoscopy capacity by March 2025, compared to pre-pandemic levels. That will allow more patients to be seen more quickly, meaning they can be diagnosed sooner and then start any treatment they need.

I will turn briefly to general practitioners, who are often key in the treatment of gynaecological conditions. As we all know, general practices are still very busy and are caring for patients in the community who are on waiting lists for secondary care. I pay tribute to the work of general practitioners and their teams throughout the pandemic. We know that some patients have struggled to get through to their GP practice on the telephone, which is why the NHS offered practices an interim telephony solution that enabled them to use Microsoft Teams to free up lines for incoming calls.

We made an additional £520 million available to improve access and expand general practice capacity during the pandemic. I mention this in passing because it is important to recognise that for many the general practitioner is the front door to the system and being able to get access to a general practitioner is a crucial part of being able to get into the care pathway, be that for diagnostic tests or for acute treatment, should that be needed.

I will wrap up now and I hope that will give the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle a few minutes to respond. In conclusion, I pay tribute to her for securing the debate and bringing it to the Chamber. What this Chamber may lack in numbers, for various reasons this afternoon, is made up for in quality and in the importance of the subject of debate. As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Ham and to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who it has always been a pleasure to appear opposite in this Chamber. I hope that I have offered some reassurance to hon. Members about the extent to which the Government take the issues that they have raised extremely seriously, and I too look forward to the publication of the strategy.

5.16 pm

Emma Hardy: I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. In different circumstances this would have been a very full debate. I look forward to seeing the women's health strategy as soon as possible. I feel I have been unable to give coverage to the number of women who have contacted me, but I say to them that I have read each and every one of their messages. The testimony that they give is incredibly moving, and clearly something needs to change.

Issues around women's health appear to be disproportionately impacted, and that is not right. I am sure we will all raise this subject again and, in all sincerity, the Minister is always welcome to campaign with me on this issue from the Back Benches.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered waiting lists for gynaecological services.

5.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 6 July 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Security Bill

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): As the world has emerged from the covid-19 pandemic, global demand for energy has risen significantly—this has been exacerbated by Putin’s malign invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the wholesale price of gas has reached historically high levels.

That is why we are taking measures to support families

We are acting now with a £37 billion package of financial support this year. Millions of the most vulnerable households will also receive £1,200 of one-off support in total this year.

Making changes to the National Insurance Contribution threshold which take effect from today, with a typical employee saving over £330 a year.

Cutting bills by investing in energy efficiency. We are also making huge progress on the energy efficiency of UK homes making them more comfortable and affordable to run, backed by £6 billion of funding over this Parliament. In 2008, 9% of UK homes had an Energy Performance Certificate of C or above—it is now 46%.

But secure, clean and affordable energy for the long term depends on the transformation of our energy system. This means more home-grown energy from more diverse sources which reduce our dependency on imported fossil fuels and our exposure to volatile and high prices in international markets. And we will reform our energy markets so consumers benefit from lower-cost, home-grown renewables and other low-carbon technologies. Our agenda will catalyse investment, reversing lost decades of under-investment, and boosting jobs and new industries in a world-leading, low-carbon economy.

That is why we are bringing forward a landmark Energy Security Bill. This Bill will deliver a cleaner, more affordable and more secure energy system for the long term. It builds on the ambitious commitments in the Prime Minister’s 10-point plan and the British energy security strategy to invest in homegrown energy and maintain the diversity and resilience of the UK’s energy supply.

We will do this by:

Leveraging private investment in clean technologies and building a homegrown energy system.

Over the last decade the UK has built one of the most diverse energy systems in the world but previous Governments have historically failed to make these investments which has left us in the current situation. The Bill will deliver key commitments from the British energy security strategy, the Prime Minister’s 10-point plan and net zero strategy to drive an unprecedented £100 billion of private sector investment by 2030 into new British industries and supporting around 480,000 clean jobs by the end of the decade.

Accelerate the growth of low carbon technologies. We will introduce state of the art business models for carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) and hydrogen, attracting private

investment by providing long-term revenue certainty. Together with the measures on CO2 transport and storage, this will put the country on a path to seize market share and grow the economy.

Enable the set up and scale up of the first of a kind CO2 transport and storage networks. The Bill will establish the economic regulation and licensing framework to ensure successful deployment.

Taking further steps to explore the role for hydrogen to heat our homes and workplaces. We will enable the delivery of a large village hydrogen heating trial by 2025, providing crucial evidence to inform strategic decisions in 2026 on the role of hydrogen in heat decarbonisation.

Scale up heat pump manufacturing and installation, and a new white goods industry in the UK. We will establish a market-based mechanism for the low-carbon heat industry to step up investment and lower the cost of electric heat pumps, through economies of scale and innovation.

Take the next big leap on the technology of the future with fusion regulation. We will make the UK the first country to legislate for fusion, providing clarity on the regulatory regime for fusion energy facilities.

Reforming our energy system to protect consumers from unfair pricing.

The last piece of primary energy legislation of this scale was the Energy Act 2013. Almost 10 years later we need to ensure that this Bill accounts for the current global context.

Enabling the extension of the energy price cap, protecting families. The energy price cap is the best safety net for 22 million households, preventing suppliers from overcharging consumers. The Bill will enable the extension of the price cap beyond 2023.

Enhancing our network security with a new system operator, which will boost energy resilience. We will establish a future system operator, an independent body with responsibilities in both the electricity and gas systems, ensuring efficient energy planning, enhancing energy security, minimising cost to consumers and promoting innovation.

Creating more competition in our electricity networks to deliver bill savings. We will enable competition in onshore electricity networks, delivering up to £1 billion savings for projects tendered over the next 10 years.

Protect consumers from increasing network prices in the event of energy network company mergers. We will enable the Competition and Markets Authority to review any relevant energy network company mergers under the Energy Network Special Merger Regime. We estimate this could save energy consumers up to £420 million over 10 years.

Protecting consumers from cyber threats with new protections for smart appliances. We are taking powers to deliver appropriate protections for consumers and the grid by placing requirements on energy smart appliances.

Helping consumers manage their energy use and cut their bills to help with the cost of living. We are continuing to drive industry progress on the smart meter rollout which is set to deliver a £6 billion net benefit to society.

Enabling innovation and gearing our system toward net zero. We will reform energy codes, overhauling the way that the technical and commercial rules of the energy system are governed.

Reducing the number of cabling, landing points, and substations. We will introduce multipurpose interconnectors as a licensable activity, we are providing certainty to investors and developers, enabling them to make decisions regarding future multi-purpose interconnector projects.

Removing obstacles to innovative batteries and pumped hydro storage. We will facilitate the deployment of electricity storage, such as batteries and pumped hydro storage, by clarifying it as a distinct subset of electricity generation.

Creating a more equal and fair energy market. We will enable the Government to establish a buy-out mechanism under the ECO scheme for suppliers.

Ensure families living on heat networks are better protected. By appointing Ofgem as the new regulator for heat networks in Great Britain, we will ensure consumers get a fair price and a reliable supply of heat.

Kick-starting the development of heat networks. By enabling heat network zoning in England, we will overcome barriers to deployment by identifying areas where they provide the lowest cost solution to heating buildings.

Taking back control of powers given to the EU on the energy performance of buildings. The Bill will provide a replacement power to enable the UK Government to amend the EU-derived Energy Performance of Buildings regime going forward.

Ensuring the safety, security and resilience of the UK's energy system.

The responsible operation of the UK energy system is crucial for our safety and security. That is why the Bill will bring forward measures relating to core fuel resilience, nuclear and the offshore oil and gas sectors.

Protect our fuel resilience from malicious action. We will bring forward measures for downstream oil security—oil terminals, filling stations etc—to prevent fuel supply disruption, such as from industrial action, malicious protest and for reasons of national security.

Boost British nuclear by removing barriers to investment. The British Energy Security Strategy is clear that nuclear is an important part of the UK's energy mix. The Bill will remove potential barriers to future investment by enhancing our nuclear third party liability regime.

Prepare for our nuclear future and clean up the past. The Bill will also facilitate the safe, and cost-effective clean-up of the UK's nuclear sites, ensuring the UK is a responsible nuclear state by clarifying that a geological disposal facility located deep below the seabed will be licensed.

Making our oil and gas sector fit for the future to ensure high standards. Our oil and gas sector will continue to play an important role in ensuring security of supply. This Bill will enable existing legislation to be updated ensuring that the offshore oil and gas environmental regulatory regime maintains high standards in respect to habitats protection and pollution response.

Ensure responsible ownership of our UK assets. The Bill will ensure that the UK's oil and gas and carbon storage infrastructure remains in the hands of companies with the best ability to operate it.

Protecting taxpayers by maximising cost recovery. In line with the polluter pays principle, the Government will be able to more fully recover the costs associated with regulating offshore oil and gas decommissioning activities from the industry.

Simplifying regulatory frameworks. This Bill will bring forward the final delicensing and re-use of nuclear sites. It will allow more proportionate clean-up of these sites, resulting in estimated savings of around £490 million (NPV) over the first 20 years, with similar savings up to 2080.

Strengthen the Civil Nuclear Police's powers to help keep Britain safe. This Bill will introduce legislation to enable the Civil Nuclear Constabulary to utilise their expertise in deterrence and armed response to support the security of other critical infrastructure sites.

[HCWS185]

DEFENCE

Atomic Weapons Establishment Pension Scheme

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has today laid a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry

of Defence is creating a new contingent liability associated with the provision of a Crown guarantee to the trustees of the Atomic Weapons Establishment defined benefit pension scheme.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the Ministry of Defence will hold. The contingent liability will become effective from 21 July 2022.

AWE has been sponsored and wholly owned by the MOD as a non-departmental public body since 1 July 2021. AWE produces the UK nuclear warhead which underpins our independent nuclear deterrent.

AWE operates two pension schemes, one of which is the AWE defined benefit pension scheme overseen by independent trustees.

The MOD has agreed with HMT that it will provide a guarantee to the scheme trustees, with the intention of securing that the scheme's assets will be sufficient to meet its liabilities. This will ensure that the scheme members can have confidence that their accrued benefits under the scheme will be paid when eligible.

The contingent liability will continue for the duration of the scheme—until such time that all members and their entitled dependants are deceased—and will crystallise only in circumstances where the scheme is terminated early and or AWE is liquidated, becomes insolvent or cannot or does not make the contributions payable in respect of the scheme as they fall due. The MOD will note a liability of £150 million over 20 years in its accounts. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

In granting the guarantee, MOD and HMT have collectively agreed in principle, subject to applicable regulations and law, to bring the scheme's assets and liabilities into central Government control in line with the Government's principles for balance sheet management, while maintaining members' existing benefits. Agreement to proceed on this basis would be subject to a detailed feasibility study being concluded in advance, including identifying the accounting and budgeting implications on the MOD, as well as any pension law compliance and value for money considerations. This study will be carried out in consultation with AWE and the trustees.

[HCWS187]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Foreign Interference Offence: Online Safety Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): This is a joint statement with the Home Office.

Some states seek to further their strategic interests by going beyond overt political influence towards more covert influencing activity. These 'interference' activities are typically not conducted transparently and are outside the norms of diplomacy. Some hostile actors from foreign states use covert and malign political interference activities to undermine the UK's interests, such as using disinformation to manipulate our political debate or weaken the integrity of our democratic institutions.

The UK has a strong record of responding robustly to state threats, in collaboration with our international partners. Alongside our existing operational response and the current disinformation provisions in the Online Safety Bill, the Government have also introduced the National Security Bill to Parliament. This Bill brings together vital new measures to protect the British public, modernise counter-espionage laws and address the evolving threat to our national security, including by introducing a new foreign interference offence which will capture a number of state-sponsored disinformation efforts.

This offence will target malign activity carried out for, on behalf of, or with the intention to benefit, a foreign power. This includes foreign interference intended to manipulate public discourse, discredit the political system, and undermine the safety or interests of the UK, with state-sponsored disinformation being a prime technique for attempting this kind of interference.

While the National Security Bill will seek to disrupt and deter foreign actors engaging in disinformation campaigns against the UK, it is important that our information environment is also protected from those who would seek to interfere in UK society by exploiting social media platforms and manipulating online spaces towards the objectives of state actors. That is why the Government are going further to address concerns about the threat posed by state-sponsored disinformation by linking the offence of foreign interference in the National Security Bill to duties in the Online Safety Bill. The Security Minister, Damian Hinds MP, has tabled an amendment to the National Security Bill which, if passed, will designate the offence of foreign interference as a “priority offence” in Schedule 7 to the Online Safety Bill.

This amendment will mean that online platforms need to act against foreign interference in line with their safety duties on illegal content, where it meets all three limbs of the foreign interference offence. These are as follows:

- a person engages in conduct for, on behalf of, or with intent to benefit a foreign power;

- the conduct is intended to interfere in the exercise of rights, manipulate the way people use public services or participate in political and legal processes in the UK, or prejudice the UK’s safety or interests;

- the conduct constitutes an offence, involves coercion of any kind, or involves making a misrepresentation for example, is a representation that a reasonable person would consider false or misleading. This includes information which is true but presented in a way which is misleading.

These three tests will capture state-sponsored disinformation that is of most concern: covert attempts by foreign state actors to manipulate our information environment to interfere in UK society and undermine our democratic, political and legal processes. For example, material spread by foreign state entities via fake accounts pretending to be real UK users to influence discussions about the future of the Union. Other examples of online content and activity that would be covered by the new offence, and for which platforms in scope of the Bill would have illegal content duties, could include:

- Russian attempts to use disinformation to interfere in future UK elections.

- Attempts by state actors to use disinformation to manipulate the legal processes of the UK, such as court proceedings.

The use of false profiles by state actors to spread hacked information online to undermine UK democratic institutions.

This amendment will force companies to take action on a wider range of state-sponsored disinformation and state-linked platform manipulation than they would have to under the Online Safety Bill as it is currently drafted. Should the amendment pass, the offence will be listed as a priority offence, meaning companies will be required proactively to put in place proportionate systems and processes to prevent individuals from encountering content that amounts to this offence, minimising the length of time it is on their service and removing any illegal content on user-to-user services once they become aware of it. They will also need to consider how their design, functionality and algorithms might impact these efforts.

In the context of the foreign interference offence, this could include measures to ensure that platform manipulation—such as misleading users about the ownership of an account, or artificially co-ordinated messaging campaigns—is more difficult, thus mitigating the risk of platform manipulation and disinformation more broadly. We have seen a number of successful efforts by service providers to disrupt state-linked disinformation and hostile influence operations relating to Ukraine on their platforms. We see this amendment building on platforms’ existing work to ensure systems and processes are in place so that these safeguards can be applied more widely and consistently when it comes to online interference aimed at the UK.

Like other offences in scope of the Bill, companies would have to assess whether content amounts to foreign interference. Assessment of foreign interference activity could include judgements based on patterns of behaviours and tactics used, and contextual judgments about the intended effect of the content, which may be aided by relevant knowledge of the political and geopolitical context. In particular, we would expect platforms to consider whether repeated and persistent conduct from particular users or accounts might meet the offence. To help platforms in carrying out this duty, companies will also be able to draw on Ofcom’s codes of practice and any supplementary guidance.

Our approach is a proportionate and effective way to address the threat posed by state-sponsored disinformation while still protecting freedom of expression in the UK. Both Ofcom and in-scope companies will have duties relating to freedom of expression, for which they can be held to account. There are already journalistic protections in the Online Safety Bill which address concerns about media freedom. News publishers’ content on their own sites is not in scope of the Bill and recognised news publishers’ content shared on these platforms will also be exempt from companies’ safety duties. There will also be duties on category 1 companies to protect journalistic content and content of democratic importance.

It is incumbent on us to safeguard our democracy and society from manipulation by state actors online while also retaining the rightful protections for freedom of expression and media freedoms. The proportionate approach I have set out here tackles the most concerning state-sponsored disinformation activity while striking a balance with freedom of expression.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

NATO Accession: Sweden and Finland

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): On 18 May 2022 Finland and Sweden submitted formal applications to join NATO. This is a historic moment. Finland and Sweden are NATO's closest partners.

They share our principles and values, including liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. They share the alliance's unwavering commitment to international security and the agreements on which it is based including the UN charter and Helsinki Final Act.

They both have years of experience training and operating with allies, and have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions. Their decision to seek NATO membership follows extensive and democratic consultations in those countries.

The Government are committed to strengthening security and defence at home and overseas. A strong NATO is at the heart of our ability to deter and defend against state adversaries.

With Russia conducting an illegal and barbaric war in mainland Europe, it is unsurprising that countries that already work closely with NATO would consider applying to join the alliance and to benefit from its collective security guarantees. We must ensure that Finland and Sweden are integrated into NATO as quickly as possible.

Therefore, in accordance with section 22 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRAG), I wish to inform the House that I believe the protocol to the north Atlantic treaty on the accession of the Republic of Finland and the protocol to the north Atlantic treaty on the accession of the Kingdom of Sweden (together the "Protocols") should be ratified without the requirements of section 20 CRAG having been met.

We need to demonstrate to two of our closest European security partners the importance we attach to our relationship with them and our whole-hearted support for their decision to join NATO.

It is imperative that allies bring Sweden and Finland under NATO's article 5 umbrella as swiftly as possible. Both countries' decision puts them at risk of a potentially aggressive Russian response. Russia has already made several threatening comments in the public domain regarding the possibility of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO.

Using this process will ensure the UK's part is concluded swiftly and use our example to encourage other allies to think radically about how quickly they can respectively ratify Sweden and Finland's accession. All 30 allies need to ratify the protocols before Finland and Sweden can join the alliance. I have been pushing my allied colleagues hard to complete the ratification process as soon as possible. It is important that the UK does everything we can to do likewise.

We believe there is broad cross-party support for Sweden and Finland joining NATO. This process will enable us to ratify Swedish and Finnish accession before the summer recess.

This Government are committed to both the principle and practice of parliamentary scrutiny of the UK's treaties. However, due to the unprecedented international security circumstances in which Finland and Sweden have made their sovereign decision to apply for NATO membership, it is important to expedite their integration into NATO as quickly as possible for their safety and for the collective strength and security of the alliance.

I confirm that the Protocols have been laid today in Parliament under Command Papers CP 730 and CP 731.

The United Kingdom looks forward to formally welcoming our longstanding allies Sweden and Finland into NATO and standing with them side by side in defence of freedom and democracy.

[HCWS188]

TRANSPORT

Second Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): In 2017, the Government published the first ever statutory cycling and walking investment strategy, which covered the period between 2016 and 2021.

The first report to Parliament on the delivery of the strategy and on the progress made towards meeting its objectives was published in February 2020. Much has changed since then, including the publication of "Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking" in summer 2020, and the new commitment to £2 billion of additional funding over this Parliament—the largest amount of dedicated spending ever committed to increasing walking and cycling in England. To date we have created Active Travel England, led by Chris Boardman, and are providing local authorities with funding to deliver 134 first-rate schemes to develop new footways, cycle lanes and pedestrian crossings across England.

Today, I am publishing the second statutory cycling and walking investment strategy—CWIS2—which covers the period between 2021 and 2025. The strategy includes new and updated objectives, including doubling cycling, increasing levels of walking across the community, and walking to school, while also setting out the funding in place to achieve these. It includes the projection that a total of nearly £4 billion will be invested in walking and cycling over the CWIS2 period, delivering new and improved walking and cycling routes across England and behaviour change programmes.

Alongside this, I am laying before Parliament the second report to Parliament on the progress made in delivering CWIS1. This shows that good progress was made in delivering the 26 actions outlined in CWIS1, including the delivery of the Cycle Ambition Cities programme and a range of behaviour change programmes. It also highlights that more than twice as much funding was invested into walking and cycling schemes over the CWIS1 period than was originally anticipated when CWIS1 was published in 2017. It also outlines the progress we have made on other measures, including those set out in the Gear Change plan. Both CWIS2 and the report to Parliament are publicly accessible online through the www.gov.uk website. A copy of CWIS2 will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS184]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Mid-Life MOT Offer: Expanded Delivery

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The mid-life MOT is a policy intervention designed to assist participants' wealth, work and wellbeing. It provides access to tailored information to allow older people to return to or remain in work.

Through the face-to-face programme, the mid-life MOT will provide a holistic assessment of an individual's health, by making sure they are able to access the necessary services; skills, by helping older people access upskilling and retraining opportunities; and finance, by empowering individuals to take control of their retirement planning.

In the winter 2021 budget, the DWP secured more than £5 million to develop and deliver more extensive pilots and development of the mid-life MOT. This follows private sector success led by the likes of Aviva, and the developing of an online version and 10 local enterprise partnership small pilots in 2021. I believe the mid-life MOT will improve participants' wealth, work and wellbeing.

The DWP has been committed to growing the mid-life MOT since its introduction in 2019. In 2021, 10 local enterprise partnerships received grants of up to £40,000 to develop and deliver local mid-life MOTs in partnership with local business. In these tests, the local enterprise partnerships worked with MOT content delivery partners, voluntary organisations, and community-based organisations to deliver support on health, skills and finances tailored to the needs of each region.

We will build on this work to develop and deliver mid-life MOTs for people aged 45 to 55 across three new workstreams. This forms part of the wider autumn Budget and spending review 2021 announcement to develop a new, enhanced offer for older people to ensure they receive the support they need to return to or remain in work:

The Department will develop and enhance the Government's digital MOT offering. We are working in partnership with the Money and Pensions Service to deliver an online digital mid-life MOT over the course of the spending review period. This is match funded by both organisations and building on previous online iterations.

We will deliver mid-life MOTs through our UK network of Jobcentre Plus offices, utilising the expertise and networks of our 50-plus champions to help older jobseekers address barriers to work associated with common challenges related to health, skills, and finance. Delivery in jobcentres will start in the summer and run across Great Britain.

The Department has launched a market engagement exercise to identify providers for a holistic, face-to-face mid-life MOT programme delivered through employers and direct to employees in three pilot areas—the North East of England; Cornwall and Devon; and East Anglia. Providers will be identified via a commercial tender process. More information can be obtained by emailing: 50PLUS.Choices@dwp.gov.uk.

These new measures are part of DWP's £22 million package to help over-50s find new careers and earn more money, including by boosting time with work coaches and bringing in specialist support.

This increased support will be furthered by 37 50-plus champions covering every district across England, Wales and Scotland who will work with local employers to help them fully utilise the talent of older workers.

[HCWS183]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 6 July 2022

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following is an extract from questions to the Prime Minister on 15 June 2022.

The Prime Minister: We have got lower unemployment than France, Germany, Italy or Canada. As I have said, we have the highest number of people in payroll jobs—620,000 more—since records began. The right hon. Gentleman might like to know that just in the first five months of this year, this country has attracted, I think, **£16 billion** of investment in its tech sector. He does not like these European comparisons; let us make them for

him. That is three times as much as Germany, twice as much as France. He should be talking this country up, not running it down.

[Official Report, 15 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 281.]

Letter of correction from the Prime Minister:

An error has been identified in my response to the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

The correct response should have been:

The Prime Minister: We have got lower unemployment than France, Germany, Italy or Canada. As I have said, we have the highest number of people in payroll jobs—620,000 more—since records began. The right hon. Gentleman might like to know that just in the first five months of this year, this country has attracted, I think, **\$16 billion** of investment in its tech sector. He does not like these European comparisons; let us make them for him. That is three times as much as Germany, twice as much as France. He should be talking this country up, not running it down.

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