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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 September 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost Increases: Food Producers and Consumers

1. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of rising costs on (a) food producers and (b) the cost of food for consumers. [901326]

14. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of rising costs on (a) food producers and (b) the cost of food for consumers. [901340]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): I draw the attention of the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also pay tribute to the previous Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team, who did fantastic work supporting UK agriculture, the environment and rural communities.

I can report to the House that Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has caused huge ripples around the world in spiking energy and food costs. Food costs rose by 12.7% in this year to July, but the Government have already taken action to support farmers, pulling forward this year's basic payment scheme payments and making sure that consumers are supported with their energy bills, with a huge package to support people with the cost of living.

Marion Fellows: I welcome the Minister to his new place. National Farmers Union of Scotland president Martin Kennedy has urged the new Prime Minister to immediately, on behalf of all food producers and consumers, "address the brutal 'here and now' facing farming and food production whilst delivering an unequivocal commitment to the importance of food security across the UK".

Given that the Prime Minister was formerly a DEFRA Minister, what funding support is being considered for Scottish and UK food producers, and what plans are there to ensure that affordable food is secured for consumers?

Mark Spencer: I hope the hon. Lady will recognise the contribution of UK farmers across generations to keeping the UK and Europe well fed for decades, which will of course continue. The Government are committed to supporting UK farmers through the use of taxpayers'

money, and I am sure that will also continue, but this is a challenge that we take very seriously and she will see that support over the coming months.

Chris Stephens: I welcome the Minister to his new role. Will he encourage the large supermarkets to enable community food projects such as Threehills Community Supermarket in Glasgow South West to purchase much-needed top-up supplies in bulk from their depots at as discounted a cost as possible, and can he assure the House that community food projects will be given top priority in his Department?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that retailers will play a huge part in solving the challenges we face, not only in the United Kingdom, but across the whole world, with the price of food going up. The Government continue to engage with those food retailers, and we will support them in any way we can to try to help our consumers. He also highlights community projects, which have a huge part to play in meeting the challenge.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Local food partnerships could play an important role in providing resilience and healthy, cost-free produce to the local community. In this time of drought and water restrictions, however, South East Water has not made an explicit exemption for such partnerships, and that will really curtail their activity. Will the Minister join me in calling on the company to revisit its position—in line, I believe, with other water companies?

Mark Spencer: Of course those water companies have other responsibilities as well, but the use of water for agricultural food production will be fundamental to our success. My hon. Friend may be aware that there is a debate in Westminster Hall later today on food infrastructure, and she may want to come and contribute to that debate.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the new Farming Minister to his place. I am delighted to see that he has been appointed during Love Lamb Week; he certainly knows his way around a lamb dinner. The sheep farmers in my Brecon and Radnorshire constituency produce world-class food that is good for our health, our environment and the rural economy. Will he take this early opportunity to restate his commitment to the red meat sector, and may I invite him to visit one of the seven livestock markets in my constituency?

Mark Spencer: I contemplated denying liking a lamb dinner, but I do not want to start by misleading the House. We recognise the huge contribution that Welsh farmers make not only to lamb production, but to food supplied to our country, and I would be delighted at some point, if my diary allows, to visit Brecon and Radnorshire to see one of those livestock markets.

Mr Speaker: I think there will be a lot of nervous lambs in Wales awaiting that visit. Let us come to the shadow Secretary of State, Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): First, may I welcome the new Secretary of State, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena),

54 and his Ministers to their place? I look forward to a constructive relationship, but it will be a testing relationship, as we work through the catalogue of failures left by his predecessor.

Rocketing food costs have pushed inflation to a 40-year high and, according to the Bank of England, households and food producers are set to face harder pressures yet. Last week, I received a letter from a family bakery who are extremely worried that their energy bills are increasing by 380%, potentially risking the viability of some of their stores. An energy crisis, a food security crisis, a labour crisis and an import cost crisis—how much worse is it going to get for businesses and the 7 million people already in food poverty?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and look forward to working with the Opposition Front Bench. I would strongly push back at his comments about the previous Secretary of State. The work he did to support rural communities and UK agriculture was fantastic, and we should pay tribute to him for that. Of course, Vladimir's invasion of Ukraine has caused massive ripples. It is a global challenge, but we are in a position where the UK economy is fit, and that puts us at an advantage compared with some of our competitors around the world. We will be able to intervene to try and assist people. We have already committed to £37 billion of support for consumers, and if the hon. Gentleman waits, he will be able to listen to the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box later today setting out her plans to support those businesses and people across the country.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome the SNP spokesperson, Pete Wishart, to his new position?

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you ever so much, Mr Speaker. It feels like business questions. I thought I was getting away from the right hon. Gentleman, but there is seemingly no escape. May I welcome him to his new role and congratulate the new Secretary of State? I know they have a huge inbox—they do not have to seek problems. As we have heard, there are rocketing prices for the rural economy and astronomical price rises for the consumer, and on top of that there is a fertiliser crisis, agflation in the sector and a harvest that remains unpicked because of the lack of seasonal labour. So is this the right time to pick a fight with the EU over the Northern Irish protocol, with the real risk of tariffs being introduced for the sector? Is now not the time to climb down, negotiate properly and get the best possible solution for our farmers, our producers and our consumers?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; I, too, thought I had escaped him. He will be surprised to know that there is another method available to us, which the SNP does not understand. We do not have to pick a fight with everybody; we can actually talk to people and negotiate, and that is what we are doing with the EU. We are trying to build relationships rather than pick a fight with the whole world.

Fertiliser Costs

2. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of fertiliser on food producers. [901327]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): Fertilisers make up around 9% of input costs into food production. Cost increases may be absorbed at various points within the supply chain, but of course we should recognise that there has been a huge spike because global energy prices are going up. The Government recognise that input costs have increased and are challenging cash flow. That is why we brought forward the direct payments to try to help people with their cash flow, and we will continue to monitor that as we move forward.

Justin Madders: Last month my constituents at CF Fertilisers were made redundant. Within days of that happening, the company announced that it was halting CO₂ production at its plant in Billingham. I know that the Minister is new in place, but I warned his predecessors again and again that we could not afford to be in such a vulnerable position and that we should have got the company sold to the many people who are interested in purchasing it. I am so disappointed that we have got to this point, because it was completely avoidable. Will he, on behalf of his Department, apologise to my constituents who have lost their jobs unnecessarily and to everyone in the country who will be paying more for their food as a result of this very short-sighted decision?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Of course, we do not want the company to be able to exploit the monopoly position it holds within the marketplace. It has ceased the production of ammonia at the plant, but it will continue to produce ammonium nitrate and nitric acid. The Government continue to engage with the plant to make sure we can secure supplies of fertiliser and other products.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Select Committee, Sir Robert Goodwill.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I do not think the situation could be any more serious for farmers in this country, both grain farmers and grass farmers. The UK requires around 2.2 million tonnes of nitrogen fertiliser, and about 1 million tonnes of that came from the Ince plant and the Billingham plant. The Ince plant is shut and the Billingham plant is paused while waiting for deliveries of ammonia in order to switch from North sea gas. In welcoming the Minister to his place on behalf of the Committee, may I ask him to say when the first load of ammonia will arrive at Billingham and when production will commence? There is a real fear that the plant might not start, and then we will really be in serious trouble.

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. That is something that we take seriously. We recognise the huge challenge to not only UK agriculture, but other sectors around the country. He will be aware that AdBlue, which many diesel cars up and down the country use, is also dependent on products of a similar nature. We will have to work together as an industry to look at other alternatives. We may have to look back at our ancestors and how agriculture operated in the '30s and '40s, with nitrogen-fixing crops and other agriculture methods, to solve some of the challenges that we face.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I, too, welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place. I am sure that we will work constructively together, and I look forward to swapping Benches at the earliest opportunity. He knows the effect that high input costs have on farmers, whether that is fuel, fertiliser or labour. I am sure that one of the first questions he put to his civil servants was about the CO₂ impacts of the shutdown of those facilities. Rather than just reassuring us, will he publish the Department's assessment of the CO₂ consequences of any shutdown at those plants?

Mark Spencer: Of course, we recognise the challenge. I have been in post for 12 hours, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I have not been able to make a full assessment of the position.

Hon. Members: Resign!

Mark Spencer: It is tempting to resign, to be honest, but I will resist at this moment. We continue to have those conversations. We recognise the size of the challenge. If the hon. Gentleman gives us a small window, we will be able to make a full assessment of where we are at.

Labour Shortages: Agriculture and Fishing

3. **John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling labour shortages in the (a) food and drink sector, (b) agricultural sector, (c) fishing industry and (d) supply chains for those sectors. [901328]

11. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to help ensure an adequate labour supply for the (a) agricultural and (b) fishing industries in Scotland. [901337]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): The Government are working to ensure that UK agriculture and fishing sectors secure the labour that they need. We know that there is a shortage of labour and it is difficult for businesses across the food sector. That is why the Prime Minister committed during the leadership campaign to looking at expanding seasonal worker schemes. The Government have already expanded the number of people in the seasonal worker route to 40,000 for horticulture and poultry in 2022; we have commissioned an independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain in England; and we launched a £10 million skills and training scheme in August 2022 to support new entrants in the fishing sector.

John Nicolson: Ending the freedom of movement has been a catastrophe for constituencies such as Ochil and South Perthshire, with labour shortages in every sector, especially food production. The lack of seasonal workers and the food rotting in the fields are evidence of yet more Brexit chaos. We all must surely agree that food waste is a scandal. Given that the new Prime Minister pledged to expand the seasonal worker scheme if she was elected, when will that be done?

Mark Spencer: I think we need to give the Prime Minister longer than 48 hours to deliver on that commitment. The hon. Gentleman would have kept us in the common fisheries policy by remaining in the EU. The country requires an immigration system that benefits

the United Kingdom; we should not just have an open door to anybody who wants to come. We need to be able to select the people who will assist the UK economy and make sure that the people who come to the United Kingdom benefit the United Kingdom.

Martyn Day: Key sectors are facing acute labour shortages because of a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for. Salmon Scotland has reported very low unemployment and extremely limited labour availability in rural areas, with processing factories 20% light on staff. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that fishing communities and processing sites have the necessary supply of workers?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I set out, the seasonal agricultural worker scheme is a huge opportunity for people to come to the United Kingdom to support the sector, but we need to make sure that we get the right people coming to support our economy. The last thing that we should do is erect a border between Scotland and the rest of the UK—that would be a tragedy for Scotland. I hope he will reflect on trying to take Scotland out of the United Kingdom.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State and the new farming Minister to their places. The seasonal worker scheme is essential to the fruit sector in my constituency of Faversham and Mid Kent, so can my right hon. Friend assure me that it will be not only extended, but improved—and sooner rather than later—so that British consumers can continue to enjoy British fruit?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for rural businesses in Kent. I hope she will be aware that in December 2021 the seasonal worker visa route was extended to 2024. This visa route allows overseas workers to come to the UK for up to six months each year to harvest edible and ornamental crops. In June, the Government announced that the food strategy will see the release of an extra 10,000 visas for the seasonal worker route, and this is something the Prime Minister committed to in the leadership election. We recognise the challenge, and we will do all we can to provide support.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State and the Minister to their positions, and I look forward to working with them. A number of those at Montgomeryshire agricultural shows raised the issue of labour shortages, and while it is great to have record levels of unemployment in Montgomeryshire, we need people in our dairy farms, our abattoirs and across our food sector. Can I implore the Minister, if he is indeed enjoying a lamb dinner in Brecon and Radnorshire, to venture up to the other half of Powys and come to the biggest Welsh lamb market in the United Kingdom to talk about these important labour shortages and what we can do?

Mark Spencer: I realise what I have started here. Of course, I recognise the contribution that Welsh farmers are making. I think we should celebrate the fact that unemployment is so low, but in sectors such as the one my hon. Friend describes, that does bring its own challenges. We recognise such challenges, which is why we have the seasonal agricultural worker scheme, and we will be continuing to expand that as we negotiate with the Home Office to make sure the scheme works.

Sewage Discharge

4. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that untreated sewage is not discharged into rivers, inland waterways and the sea. [901329]

10. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What steps he is taking to help ensure sewage is not discharged into UK waterways. [901336]

16. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that untreated sewage is not discharged into rivers, inland waterways and the sea. [901342]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The volume of sewage spewed out by water companies is completely unacceptable, and the public have rightly shown their outrage. Yesterday, in my first day in office, I told water chief executives that it is not good enough, and I have instructed them to write to me formally by 21 September with a plan for how they will make significant improvements. I also met the Environment Agency and Ofwat, and I told them that they should use every enforcement power available to them to make sure that there is compliance. I will not hesitate to take further action if I do not see the pace of change that this House expects.

Catherine West: Over the summer, I had the pleasure of meeting those from the Hampstead and Highgate Angling Society, who fish in all 32 London boroughs. The River Wandle has had a very bad incident of water pollution, which included human sewage, and in the past the Environment Agency itself has said that the fines meted out to Thames Water were “not sufficient”. What is the Secretary of State going to do to improve this desperate situation?

Mr Jayawardena: First, it is this Government who introduced the monitoring that allows us to know what is going on. Secondly, it was this Government who introduced the Environment Act 2021, which allows the Environment Agency to levy unlimited fines on water companies.

Sarah Olney: We all looked on in horror at the viral images of beaches in Sussex being destroyed by disgusting sewage overflows. I have heard that businesses in the area that are very reliant on income from tourists—from beachside cafés in Seaford to tourist hotspots in Eastbourne—have lost money because beaches were shut and people were put off swimming in poisoned water. Will the Minister demand that Southern Water compensates Sussex seaside businesses?

Mr Jayawardena: First, I have already set out to the House what I intend to do. Secondly, I would observe that the Liberal Democrats’ plan is simply to play politics with this serious issue. When they were in government they did not take the action that we have done now. Sadly—and this is the serious point—what they are calling for in their leaflets is for sewage to flow back into people’s homes, because that is the consequence of what they are proposing.

Kate Osborne: Since asking a question on this issue in the House on Tuesday, we now have a new Secretary of State—I welcome him to his place—but we also have a new wave of sewage warnings across the country. Over 100 beaches have pollution warnings for untreated sewage. Water companies such as Northumbrian Water in my area have paid billions in dividends for dumping filthy raw sewage on to our playing fields, our beaches and our waters, and that is having a huge impact on biodiversity and public health. I went to the River Don in Boldon in my constituency a few weeks back, and the stench alone made clear the scale of the issue. The last Minister refused to do anything about this environmental vandalism. Will the new Minister take urgent action?

Mr Jayawardena: First, I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s account at the end of her question. The Government have been working on this issue, and we passed the landmark Environment Act 2021. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Double) published his plan over the summer, and we set out in that plan that there will be £56 billion of capital investment to tackle these issues. Indeed, we have ruled out some of the rises that the Opposition would have liked, which have added £122 to household bills. As I set out to the House, we are tackling this.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Ripping out our existing combined sewerage infrastructure is simply unaffordable, but will the Secretary of State, who I welcome to his post, look at sustainable development systems of the sort that have been implemented to very good effect in cities as far away as China and North America, particularly as the Government look at revising their planning laws to build much-needed housing?

Mr Jayawardena: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he says. He is right that we should look at innovation from around the world to ensure that we are transforming our infrastructure, including in the water system.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position, and I am pleased with the strength of the DEFRA team. I have spoken to him this morning about flooding on the River Severn, and I have also been contacted by residents of Coton Hill about the quality of the River Severn through Shrewsbury, and some of the discharge issues that he has heard about. Will he please accept my invitation to visit the River Severn and meet residents, and hear their strength of feeling about the need for him to take action on this essential issue?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is a great champion for these issues, and I welcome what he said earlier. Although I do not know what is in my diary tomorrow, I would be delighted to visit at the earliest opportunity, and for other Ministers to do the same.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The Liberal Democrats seem obsessed with my constituency, whether that is the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) this morning, or the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) yesterday. Does the Secretary of State agree that they need to be honest with people in my town of Seaford that their plan, when heavy rainfall

occurs, would result in sewage backing up into people's homes, gardens and roads, and that the Government's £56 billion investment is the only sustainable solution?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituents and constituency, and she is right to say that although storm overflows should not be used, they are a safety valve. They stop the flooding of raw sewage back into people's homes—that is what the Liberal Democrats are promising.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Over the summer, the Government allowed water bosses to dump sewage on 90 beaches in our coastal hotspots—the foundation of those visitor economies—affecting already hard-squeezed businesses that are barely keeping their heads above water. We hear that the Secretary of State is satisfied by a telephone call with water bosses, but does he not realise that they are laughing at him? They are laughing at Ofwat, laughing at the Environment Agency, laughing at the country, and laughing all the way to the bank. Without tougher penalties to ensure that there is a bottom line, they will not change their behaviour. Does he agree that there must be tougher sanctions, including prison sentences?

Mr Jayawardena: I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to be constructive, but now he is playing politics. Clearly he was not listening when I set out my plan a moment ago. First, the water companies are reporting back in two weeks, and secondly we have legislated to issue unlimited fines through a criminal process, and we will not hesitate to do more.

Fish Stocks and Marine Life

5. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that rivers, inland waterways and the sea can sustain fish stocks and other marine life. [901330]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): The UK's rivers and seas boast some of the greatest biodiversity and marine life anywhere in the world. The Government have prioritised protecting species, not least by leaving the common fisheries policy that did so much to damage fish stocks. We have also announced plans to reduce the sewage being discharged in our seas and rivers, and we have recently taken action to protect our precious chalk streams against drought.

Alex Cunningham: I hope that the Minister is aware of the ecological disaster off the coast of Teesside and North Yorkshire that has had a devastating effect on the fishing industry. Catches are now less than 10% of what they were, and it appears that a large part of our sea is dead or dying. When will Ministers recognise that they cannot rely on the conclusion that an algal bloom was probably the cause of this disaster, order a more comprehensive study into what is happening and come up with solutions to save our sea?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, who has done a lot to highlight the issue. We do have to listen to science and the scientists who have done investigations, and one of their conclusions was that the algal bloom was a huge factor. We continue to talk to bodies in the north, including the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which is continuing to carry out tests on material from the north-east coast. It is a challenge that we recognise, and we will continue to work with the authorities in that part of the country.

Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill

6. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. [901332]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was introduced in June 2021 as part of our animal welfare action plan. The Bill delivers three important manifesto commitments—strengthening protections for pets, farmed and kept wild animals—as well as other valued reforms. It was reintroduced in May following Her Majesty's most Gracious Speech and will continue to Report as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Mr French: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer and welcome him to his position. I am sure that he will do an excellent job and look forward to working with him. I also welcome the Government's commitment to the kept animals Bill, which will introduce landmark protections for pets, livestock and kept wild animals. That will include helping in the fight against puppy and kitten smuggling and cracking down on pet theft. Those milestone protections are hugely important to my constituents in Old Bexley and Sidcup who, like me, are animal lovers—hopefully, they may even vote for Westminster dog of the year next week. Will he provide assurances that the Government's commitment to this landmark legislation will mean that Ministers will now go further and explore measures such as increasing the minimum age at which dogs can be brought to the UK, and prohibiting the importation to the UK of heavily pregnant dogs and those with cropped ears?

Mr Jayawardena: The kept animals Bill does include the powers to introduce those restrictions through secondary legislation. Last year, Her Majesty's Government launched a consultation that proposed measures for both commercial and non-commercial movements of dogs into Great Britain, and I am told that there were more than 20,000 responses, so there was clearly a great deal of interest from the public. My Department will publish a response in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Secretary of State to his place. I pay tribute to the previous DEFRA team and look forward to continuing a robust relationship with the new team.

On a recent visit to Battersea here in London and to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Newport, I saw the consequences of the Tory cost of living crisis. I heard about Frasier, a

four-year-old domestic short-hair cat who was taken to Battersea in June by his heartbroken owner who was facing financial hardship and could no longer afford to keep his beloved pet. That is happening across our country because people cannot afford to keep their family pets, so we need a plan. Will the Secretary of State tell us what it is?

Mr Jayawardena: First, the Government will cut people's taxes. We are going to let people keep more of their own money. We are going to ensure that people continue to have great jobs in the economy by incentivising investment in our businesses. If the hon. Lady and Opposition Members are willing to stay in the House a bit longer, they will hear from the Prime Minister herself.

Topical Questions

T1. [901344] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): It is a privilege to be asked to serve as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In doing so, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) for his nine years of service as a Minister in the Department, and to all those who served with him. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister set out her commitment to get Britain growing. That means backing our thriving British food industry, working for a cleaner environment and maximising the benefits of Brexit. From food security and supporting our farmers to water quality and economic growth for our rural communities, there is much to do, and the Government are determined to deliver.

Jessica Morden: Valiant food banks serving Newport East tell me that they will really struggle to stay open this winter with rising energy, fuel and insurance costs and people finding it more difficult to donate to them. They provide a vital service that, sadly, we will need more than ever before, so what immediate steps will the Government take to help them stay open this winter?

Mr Jayawardena: I encourage the hon. Lady to wait to hear the Prime Minister later today.

T2. [901346] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): From farm to fork, long-term decisions on rising energy prices are being made that could have a devastating impact on food security. Will my right hon. Friend please work with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that food production businesses and the wider supply chain receive the support they need to tackle rising energy prices?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is, of course, right. I also encourage him to wait to hear what the Prime Minister says later today. It is very, very important to ensure we continue to be able to produce some of the best food in the world and the Government are committed to doing that.

T3. [901347] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is not just beaches. In 2021, Ealing and Acton saw 34 raw sewage dumps—216 hours' worth—including in the dear old River Brent. Did taking back control mean returning to being the dirty man of Europe? Is it any wonder that "Brexit opportunities" has vanished from the new ministerial responsibilities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Double): Listening to those on the Labour Benches, one would think that between 1997 and 2010 there was no sewage discharge from our system. The fact is that there was, but it is only because of the measures that this Government have taken to put monitoring in place that we are aware of the problem, and we are now the first Government ever to take action to solve this problem.

T6. [901351] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Rob and Sally Mercer, in their farm near Lichfield, each week provide fresh meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables to around 250 families. They run an education project, too, and they have an established charity. I have nominated them for a National Farmers Union community farming hero award, so my challenging question to the Minister is this: does he agree with me that they should get it?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): I pay tribute to Rob and Sally. Staffordshire farmers are second only to Nottinghamshire farmers in their delivery for UK food production.

Mr Speaker: And the great county of Lancashire.

T4. [901348] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The Government have said that they aspire to be a global leader in animal welfare, yet only one of the three animal welfare Bills proposed in the 2021 Queen's Speech has since been enshrined into law. Earlier this year the Government scrapped the Animals Abroad Bill entirely, which would have ensured that cruel animal practices abroad were not supported by the UK consumer market. Does the Minister agree that a country that cares for animals as much as we do should play no part in the import of fur, foie gras and hunting trophies?

Mr Jayawardena: We have long set out that we have no plans to change our animal welfare, food safety or environmental standards, and that remains the case.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): In my tourist town of Eastbourne, the sea is our greatest asset. Meeting with the Environment Agency just a week or two ago, water quality was deemed to be good, yet social media discharges by local Liberal Democrats would have people believe that it is dangerous to swim. Does my hon. Friend agree that the raft of measures we are bringing in through the Environment Act 2021 will not only improve the quality of the water, but that responsible, balanced and honest accounting is important, too?

Steve Double: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for her constituency of Eastbourne and the businesses there. She is absolutely right. This is the first Government

ever to take the action we are taking to address this long-standing issue that has been going on for many, many generations. She is absolutely right that the misinformation put out by some Opposition parties is shameless scaremongering.

T5. [901350] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): During her leadership campaign, the now Prime Minister chose to make a big thing of solar panels being on agricultural land. She did not talk about biomass, which actually takes up far more arable land. Does the Secretary of State agree with her attacks on solar, or does he think that it has a role to play in helping to sort out our energy crisis?

Mr Jayawardena: I want to see top-quality agricultural land being used to grow food.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The Agriculture Act 2020 states that the Secretary of State has to come before Parliament every three years to report on the UK's food security. Will he do so this autumn?

Mr Jayawardena: Having been in the role just over 24 hours, I will review all my duties in due course.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Environment Agency is a key player in tackling sewage discharges, yet it has seen its funding halved over the past 10 years. What is the Minister doing to reinstate the essential funding for the Environment Agency?

Steve Double: I do not recognise the figures that the hon. Lady quotes. In this spending review, the DEFRA budget increased by more than £4 billion, and the Environment Agency is being more active than ever before in enforcing the regulations on our water quality.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I want to see clean water in the Ladybrook, the Micker brook and all the streams that feed into the great River Mersey. United Utilities is responsible for our waste water and sewage discharges. It is consulting on its plan to spend up to £18 billion on the water quality and discharges in our area. I am asking my Cheadle constituency to join that consultation. Will the Minister join me in encouraging everybody to play their part and make their voices heard?

Steve Double: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that addressing that long-standing issue will be a combined effort with everyone working together. It is really important that everyone engages in ensuring that we get the right solutions in every situation to address the problem and reduce the amount of sewage being discharged as quickly as possible.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Diolch, Mr Speaker. The demand for pet food banks is more than doubling in parts of the UK as owners have to make heartbreaking decisions thanks to the cost of living crisis. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), said, charities are bracing themselves for an increase in the number of abandoned animals, but it does not have to be this way. What assurances can the Minister give us about targeted financial support for those charities through a really difficult winter?

Steve Double: I am sure that we would all agree that owning a pet brings additional responsibilities. Everyone should consider those, including the costs, before deciding whether to take on that responsibility. The Government have already introduced £37 billion-worth of support to help households, targeting that at those most in need. The Prime Minister will announce further measures later today.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his place, as well as the news from the Environment Agency on Wednesday that there will now be a regulatory investigation into Walleys Quarry in my constituency. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for his help over the summer. Will the new Secretary of State visit Newcastle-under-Lyme, and does he agree that now that we have two investigations—regulatory and criminal—into Walleys Quarry Ltd, it is imperative that those are concluded as soon as possible so that my constituents get justice and everyone gets to see some accountability?

Steve Double: I am very aware of the issue that my hon. Friend is raising, and I am pleased that we are making progress with the Environment Agency on enforcement action. I am very happy to meet him to ensure that we continue to do all we can, and if appropriate, to visit the site with him.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Ukrainian Refugees

1. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to help support Ukrainian refugees. [901367]

7. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to help support Ukrainian refugees. [901373]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Six bishops and hundreds of clergy have Ukrainian evacuees living with them, and the Church of England is using vacant vicarages in a number of places. Churches are also actively involved in recruiting new hosts where needed.

Greg Smith: Over the summer, I was delighted to meet Reverend Peter Godden at St Dunstan's church in Monks Risborough—England's oldest recorded parish—to hear at first hand about some of the incredible work that the church and wider deanery is doing to support 130 Ukrainian refugees who have been welcomed to the wider Princes Risborough area in my constituency, such as English lessons, a conversation café and a children's summer week. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking all our churches for the work they are doing to support our Ukrainian friends? What more can the Church of England do to support churches such as St Dunstan's in their work?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the interest that he takes in and the support that he gives to his local churches. It is wonderful to hear of the practical compassion in action of St Dunstan's in Monks Risborough and St Mary's in Princes Risborough. I know that those churches are making a big difference to the lives of Ukrainian refugees. I assure him that the Church is actively seeking new hosts where some families want to pass on that responsibility and it will keep on with this important work.

Sir Desmond Swayne: As we approach the six-month point, what action can the Church take to encourage members of their congregations to step forward—and the congregations themselves to support them—where some initial sponsorships are not renewed?

Andrew Selous: My right hon. Friend asks a typically pertinent question. I reassure him that many dioceses are developing schemes to rematch sponsors and Ukrainian refugees as the initial six-month placements draw to an end. We are also funding other support programmes for Ukrainians, for which I am extremely grateful. We must all guard against compassion fatigue.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that my parish church in Huddersfield is playing a very good role in helping Ukrainian refugees, but in a sense the honeymoon period is over? People from Ukraine in my constituency told me last week that they need help with permanent housing, with education and with the translation of their qualifications into English qualifications. They also very much need to use their high skills to help the community.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has told the House. I know that he takes a supportive interest in what his local churches do in this important area. He is right in everything he says. The Government will play their part, and I can assure him that the Church will absolutely continue to be there at a national and local level to do everything that is needed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his deep interest in these matters, which is much appreciated. Following on from what other hon. Members have said about the integration of Ukrainian refugees, has consideration been given to allowing the use of parish halls free of charge for English lessons and as community hubs for small pockets of rural Ukrainians to meet?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman makes typically sensible suggestions. He has put them on the record, and I know that the Church will do everything possible nationally and locally. He has made good suggestions.

Persecuted Christians: 2019 Report

2. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to help implement the recommendations of the report of the Bishop of Truro on support for persecuted Christians published in 2019.

[901368]

Andrew Selous: I thank my right hon. Friend for her sustained and long-term interest in freedom of religion and belief for Christians and people of all faiths around the world. At the Lambeth conference, the Bishop of Chelmsford, herself a Christian refugee from Iran, spoke about the need to challenge some of the darker elements of faith leaders who condone persecution.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In the light of the conclusions of the independent review assessing the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's report on supporting persecuted Christians around the world, what improvements would the Church like to see in relation to the envoy for freedom of religion or belief? My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has done a wonderful job, but we want to see the post established on a permanent basis, with greater capacity to engage across Government and resources to match.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising an extremely important point. Our hon. Friend the faith envoy, who is in the Chamber, does a fantastic job. I can assure my right hon. Friend that the Church remains completely committed to the full implementation of the Truro review, especially recommendation 6, which is to make the envoy a permanent position with "appropriate resources and authority" to work across Government.

Mr Speaker: Now that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has been named, I think we ought to bring her in.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for her question and my hon. Friend the Second Church Estates Commissioner for his answer. The recent independent review of progress on Truro has confirmed that there is more to be done before FORB becomes firmly embedded in the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. One area that was highlighted is the need for better engagement with stakeholders, among which the Church is key. Would the Second Church Estates Commissioner be willing to join me to discuss the matter at a meeting with an FCDO Minister, which has been agreed?

Andrew Selous: I should be delighted, and I would like to bring our bishops who lead in the area and senior officials from Church House to that important meeting.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Elections Act 2022: Electoral Commission

3. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): If the Committee will make an assessment of the potential effect of the Elections Act 2022 on the impartiality of the Electoral Commission.

[901369]

10. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): If the Committee will make an assessment of the potential effect of the Elections Act 2022 on the impartiality of the Electoral Commission. [901376]

11. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If the Committee will make an assessment of the potential effect of the Elections Act 2022 on the impartiality of the Electoral Commission. [901377]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Speaker's Committee has no plans to make an assessment of the potential effect of the Elections Act on the impartiality of the Electoral Commission. The commission itself has raised concerns about the potential challenge to its impartiality from the introduction of a strategy and policy statement by which the Government can guide its work. Its view is that that is inconsistent with the role that an independent electoral commission plays in a democratic system. The commission is currently considering the consultation on the draft statement and will publish its response in due course.

Allan Dorans: The last Prime Minister and the Government attacked the impartiality of the Electoral Commission after the Downing Street flat refurbishment was found in breach of donation declaration rules and a fine was subsequently imposed. That was followed by leading Tory Members calling for the abolition of the Electoral Commission or, sinisterly, for its direction to be controlled via the Elections Act strategy and policy statement. Does the representative of the Speaker's Committee agree that the new Prime Minister should commit to protecting the independence of the Electoral Commission and should remove the specific aspects of Government overreach in the Elections Act?

Christian Matheson: As I said in my previous answer, the Speaker's Committee has made no assessment on this particular matter. Any changes to the Elections Act will be a matter for the House, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will pursue those avenues in other areas of its business.

Owen Thompson: The road down which the UK has been travelling is increasingly concerning. It involves removing our human rights, threatening the removal of the European Court of Human Rights, and then gutting the impartiality and powers of the Electoral Commission in the Elections Act 2022 by Government diktat and the rejection of all Opposition amendments. This follows on from suggestions that no new independent ethics adviser will be appointed under the new Prime Minister, which would further diminish independent investigation. Given those facts, does the representative of the Speaker's Committee agree with all but one of the board members that the Elections Act seriously undermines the independence of the Electoral Commission?

Christian Matheson: Let me repeat the statement that the Electoral Commission itself has issued: it believes that the introduction of a strategy and policy statement would be inconsistent with the role of an independent Electoral Commission. We are currently engaged in consultation on the Government's draft strategy and policy statement. The Commission will continue to act in an independent and impartial way in order to help maintain public confidence in elections throughout the UK.

Martyn Day: The Electoral Commission manages elections and plays a vital role in maintaining fairness, trust and public confidence in our democratic processes, and its independence of any party or Government is therefore essential. Does the hon. Member agree that one way of helping to defend that independence would be to ensure that in future the Speaker's Committee never has a Government majority, and would he be willing to raise that with the Speaker of the House of Commons?

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman himself has raised it with you, Mr Speaker, and I believe that the composition of the Committee is a matter for you. Its composition changed recently because of the reallocation of responsibilities from one Government Department to another, and therefore the chairmanship of the relevant Select Committee—the previous Chair was ex officio—has changed: the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) has been replaced by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I believe that you, Mr Speaker, will be reviewing the position regularly.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Holy Trinity Church, Wingate: Review

4. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What progress the Church has made on the review of lessons learned at Holy Trinity Church, Wingate. [901370]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): This has been a deeply troubling time for the Bell family, and I want to pass on my heartfelt apologies for what has happened. I am pleased that the issue has been resolved and the lessons learned process begins next month, and I know that the vicar of Holy Trinity Wingate has strongly supported the family during this difficult time.

Grahame Morris: May I place on record my thanks to the hon. Member for his assistance with this matter during the recess?

I can report to the House that Thomas Bell's coffin has been located, and that his late wife Hilda was buried with him after a heartbreaking eight-week delay. Appallingly, however, for 17 years the family—who were my constituents, living in Easington—unknowingly attended the wrong grave, and in the process of locating Mr Bell's coffin several other errors were identified. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to improve burial records, with digital copies, introduce a new process for marking plots after burial, and draw up rules for the orderly organisation of plots in churchyards?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: record-keeping is incredibly important. The Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 clearly states that records should be kept in fireproof places, and the hon. Gentleman's point about digital copies was also well made. The lessons learned inquiry will focus on best practice for all parishes. Let me add, on a personal note, that I was very pleased that Mrs Bell's great-grandchild was baptised in the church last weekend.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Elections Act 2022: Regulation and Electoral Process

5. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the Elections Act 2022 on the (a) regulation of political party donations and finances, (b) regulation of campaign expenditure and (c) overall integrity of the electoral process. [901371]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Speaker's Committee has not made an assessment of the potential effect of the Elections Act on the matters the hon. Member refers to in her question. The Commission's view is that the Elections Act makes limited changes to the regulation of political party donations and finances and campaign spending. The requirement for new political parties to set out assets or debts when registering will give voters some greater transparency. Changes relating to third-party campaigners will bring limited additional transparency while increasing the complexity of the law. The digital imprint requirement will increase the transparency of campaign spending. The changes to the administration and conduct of elections will enhance the integrity of the electoral process. The Commission's view is that the voter ID requirement addresses a vulnerability of polling station voting in Great Britain to fraud, but it has emphasised that voting must remain accessible for those who do not already have appropriate ID.

Marion Fellows: According to openDemocracy, between 2010 and 2019 the Tory party received £3.5 million from Russian-linked donors, yet instead of countering undue influence from oligarchs or shady think-tanks, the Elections Act weakens rules on donations from overseas, making it easier to pay for influence. The new report by the Institute for Constitutional and Democratic Research has set out a simple remedy: cap all political donations to a level appropriate to the poorest. Will the representative of the Speaker's Committee confirm whether a donation cap has been considered?

Christian Matheson: The cap has not been considered in the Speaker's Committee or discussed by the Speaker's Committee and the Electoral Commission. The Commission says that it is committed to ensuring that political funding is transparent and to preventing unlawful foreign money from entering UK politics. It continues to recommend changes to the law to ensure that voters can have greater confidence in political finance in the UK. This includes recommendations for new duties on parties for enhanced due diligence and risk assessment of donations and changes to the law to ensure that companies have made enough money in the UK to fund any donations.

Elections Policy: Departmental Transfer

8. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether the Committee has made an assessment of the implications for its work of the transfer of elections policy from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities. [901374]

Christian Matheson: The Speaker's Committee has not made any such assessment. However, the change in ministerial responsibility has had an impact on the Committee in a number of ways. As I mentioned in a previous answer, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) has been replaced as an ex officio member of the Committee by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). The Commission reports that it will continue to work closely with the team of civil servants, which has moved Departments. It has also had several meetings with responsible Ministers at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in particular to discuss the implementation of the Elections Act.

Patricia Gibson: The governance of elections is of course a very important matter, and it was rather bizarrely removed from the portfolio of the Cabinet Office by the previous Prime Minister and entrusted to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Can the representative of the Speaker's Committee provide any clarity on whether that will continue, and what consideration has been given to the merits of transferring the responsibility back to the Cabinet Office?

Christian Matheson: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, but the Committee will simply respond to however the Government organise themselves. It is a matter for the Government and the Prime Minister to allocate different responsibilities among different parties, and the Speaker's Committee will respond accordingly.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Affordable and Sustainable Housing

9. Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to provide affordable, sustainable housing on its land. [901375]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Following the Church's "Coming Home" report on meeting housing need, the Church is looking to establish a new national housing association and to make use of Church-owned land to develop more affordable homes where we are able to, along with pod homes to house vulnerable people temporarily.

Caroline Ansell: Understandably, there were mixed feelings when the original St Elizabeth's church in Eastbourne's old town had to be demolished, but the church community moved next door and is thriving. Demolition created a significant site in a prime location in a town where housing development opportunities are few and far between. May I ask my hon. Friend what progress has been made in order to realise the potential on the site?

Andrew Selous: St Elizabeth's Eastbourne was due for demolition in 2019 because the building was unsafe, and I am pleased that the congregation are thriving in their new location. We are now looking for a new home for the Hans Feibusch murals from the crypt, which I have to say, from the photographs I have seen of them, are very splendid. We are working with the local council, developers and the local community to find an appropriate housing scheme for this site.

Accessibility of Churches

12. **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to improve the accessibility of churches for people with disabilities.
[901378]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England strongly encourages parishes and cathedrals to ensure access for all, wherever possible. On a personal note, I am grateful to the parish church where I grew up for providing ramps to get my mother in and out of the church in her wheelchair. The public worship of Jesus should always be accessible to as many people as possible.

Dr Johnson: The Holy Trinity or West Allington church is beautiful and historic, but access to it is quite

poor. The lovely grass slope going up to the church means that, in winter and in poor, wet weather, the church is inaccessible to the elderly and those with disabilities, and some of my constituents have missed family funerals as a result. What can the Church Commissioners do to help?

Andrew Selous: It is typical of my hon. Friend's conscientiousness that she has visited Holy Trinity, Allington to help get these much-needed improvements. If she contacts the archdeacon of Boston, the archdeacon will work with her and the parish, with the assistance of the church buildings department, to improve their bid for the necessary funds to help revitalise the church as a resource for the whole community. As she says, it is appalling that people have not been able to attend family funerals.

Business of the House

10.30 am

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

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Leader of the House to her position at the Dispatch Box.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I paid tribute to my predecessor yesterday but, before I announce the business, I would like to place on record my sadness and my thanks for the life and service of Nick Munting MBE, who gave this House 35 years' service.

The business for the week commencing 12 September will include:

MONDAY 12 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Public Order Bill.

WEDNESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, followed by a motion relating to the Procedure Committee's first report of 2022-23 on proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall.

THURSDAY 15 SEPTEMBER—Debate on a motion on NHS dentistry, followed by a general debate on the national food strategy and food security. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 SEPTEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 September includes:

MONDAY 19 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and I join her tribute to the former member of staff.

It is a pleasure to welcome the Leader of the House. As she dives into her new job, I hope it is not too cheesy to wish her all the best in making a splash. I also thank the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) for his service. The Leader of the House's brief is unique in that it requires cross-party co-operation on a number of matters, and I look forward to working with the Leader of the House, as I looked forward to working with her predecessor.

The well-respected former Cabinet Secretary, Lord O'Donnell, said, "it is always best to look at the reasons why your predecessor fell and fix them." I have been calling for the Government to bring forward the Standards Committee's recommendations on strengthening the code of conduct for MPs for months. It is incredibly disappointing to see that it is missing from the business again. Will the Leader of the House please pass on Lord O'Donnell's wise words to the Prime Minister and bring forward those recommendations urgently?

I pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and his Committee for their excellent work, which must not go to waste. Labour

has long called for transparency on Members' interests and for a ban on paid consultancy work. Where Labour wants to act, the Tories sit on their hands. Labour would go even further by establishing an integrity and ethics commission that would sanction Ministers who breach the rules, but the Prime Minister has refused to say whether she will even appoint a new ethics adviser after the last two resigned in despair. There is clearly a need for stronger enforcement of the rules across Parliament and across Government. Will the Leader of the House tell me when the much-needed new ethics adviser will be announced?

The Government's legislative agenda is in disarray. Without going all Craig David, let us look at their first few days. On Monday, the data Bill was pulled. It fell well short on ambition, but it was supposed to unlock growth and business opportunities. Does the new Culture Secretary support the Bill? If so, when will it be rescheduled? Or are the Government planning to drop it completely? We need clarity on which Bills from the Queen's Speech of just four months ago the Government will be proceeding with. Are they dropping any other legislation that we should know about? If they are, may I suggest that the Leader of the House uses the space for the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), which would give real protection and succour to victims of future public disasters and their families? It would be a lasting legacy for the Hillsborough families, who have suffered so much.

On Tuesday, the scrutiny session on the National Security Bill was cancelled when the latest Minister—[*Interruption.*] Well, I don't know what happened. There have been four Ministers over the course of that Bill. Why could the Government not get anyone to turn up? Our Labour Back Benchers did. The zombie Government continue. Can the Leader of the House give us assurances that business on national security, or indeed anything else, will not be delayed again because Ministers cannot be bothered to turn up?

On Wednesday, whatever Craig David was up to, the Leader of the House announced that the Prime Minister would swerve scrutiny by announcing policy today in a general debate rather than making herself properly accountable by giving a ministerial statement. I see instead that there is to be a written ministerial statement, but it has not yet been published. Members cannot be expected to properly scrutinise significant policy when we have not seen it. When will it be published? Either way, this is not the same as bringing forward a policy, legislation and an implementation plan, and there is nothing in the Leader of the House's statement. The energy price cap increases in less than a month, and without the legislation families will suffer. It is days away that the bills go up, so when are we going to do this?

So, the Government dropped a Bill on Monday, did not turn up on Tuesday, did something else on Wednesday and here they are planless on Thursday. Labour has been calling for action on energy bills for months. We could have passed legislation to freeze the energy price cap by now. Throughout the leadership campaign the Prime Minister consistently said she is against windfall taxes. What is it about this former Shell employee, the new Prime Minister, that means she is so determined to protect the £170 billion of excess oil and gas profits?

She must now choose whose side she is on. Labour's plan, backed by the country, is fully funded by a windfall tax on oil and gas companies. The Prime Minister is making working people pay. We have a new Prime Minister but the same story. Only Labour can tackle the Tory cost of living crisis, get money back into people's pockets and deliver a fresh start for Britain.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind and witty remarks on my appointment, although I have to disappoint her, because I am afraid there is nothing wet about me.

I am deeply honoured to have this role at a time when we have to restore trust in this place and in our politics, and that trust has to be earned through our conduct and our care, but also our policies. That is why—in answer to the hon. Lady's question about energy costs—this Prime Minister believes in keeping our promises and delivering certainty for both households and people, and businesses and investors in this country.

I was buoyed up to hear the hon. Lady want to talk about the Prime Minister's predecessor. I am taking that as an encouraging sign that she thinks the current Prime Minister is rather good. However, the hon. Lady does raise important issues about the code of conduct and the Prime Minister's ethics adviser. I have asked for an early meeting with the Chairman of the Standards Committee—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) No, I asked for it, actually.

Penny Mordaunt: We can debate over time, but I am pretty quick off the mark. The ethics adviser is a matter for the Prime Minister. She has an enormous in-tray to get through, but I know that she has a spectacular work rate and will get to these issues swiftly. I am keen to talk to the Chairman of the Committee, but I understand the importance of bringing these things forward swiftly and undertake to do so.

I thank the hon. Lady for her kind advice on House business. We will be announcing business in the usual way. On today's debate, I think it is incredibly important that we will have debate time today on this most pressing issue. Members of this House will have been speaking to their constituents and businesses over the summer, and will want to get on record their views about what can happen. I just point out the care that the Prime Minister has taken to be able to give Members of this House information at the earliest possible occasion but not to breach the rules, as Mr Speaker would want—he would want this House to know first. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members cannot have their cake and eat it. They cannot ask for information not to be disclosed prior to a debate and then criticise us for exactly that. Nick Robinson said on the “Today” programme this morning that he did not have the details of this. A written ministerial statement has been tabled and will be published shortly, in plenty of time for the debate this afternoon. As I said yesterday, that will not be the only occasion when Members will be able to comment on the measures being brought forward by this Government.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her position. It was an honour to serve with her in the Ministry of Defence, and I know she will apply the same due diligence to this role.

My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are committed to investing in new hospitals around the country. Leeds has an ambitious plan for a new general infirmary and children's hospital, which will also have a new innovation hub, bringing £11.5 billion to the local economy. May we have a debate in Government time about the progress that project is making, so that I can sell the merits of the Leeds bid to her and our colleagues in government?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work he has done to progress that capital build. I encourage him to talk to the new Health Secretary—I am sure he has already written to her on the matter. He is very good at representing his constituents and will know all the means by which he can secure a debate on the Floor of the House on this important matter for them.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new SNP spokesperson, Deidre Brock.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Leader of the House to her new position and look forward to working with her and the shadow Leader of the House. I pay tribute to my energetic and witty predecessor, who enlivened many a session in this place over many years.

I welcome the news of the Government's general debate on energy costs today, where the Prime Minister will finally detail the support to be offered to our many constituents who are struggling at this time. I believe she will also detail exactly what the Government plan to do about fracking and increasing oil and gas extraction, while remaining committed to their manifesto commitment to net zero by 2050.

Exciting times, eh, Mr Speaker? We have an exciting new Cabinet packed with exciting new talents: hard-line Brexiters, climate change sceptics and free marketers. We have a new Justice Secretary infamous for being prepared to break international law in a “limited and specific way”, and a Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy whose desk apparently does not boast a computer and who is on record as being a climate change denier. Obviously, they are raring to go and get stuck in—keen as mustard, like kids in their first week at school. And there are more announcements to come. Who knows what fresh delights await us?

I have a couple of questions, Mr Speaker. First, can the right hon. Lady confirm whether the newspaper reports are correct and the so-called Bill of Rights is, to the relief of so many, finally being booted up into the Back Benches with the former Justice Secretary—its biggest fan—or whether it is only simmering on the Government's back burner until the new PM decides once again that just what the long-suffering people of these isles really need is politicians fiddling around with basic human rights that do not need to be fiddled around with?

Finally, other newspaper reports caused quite a stir in Scotland over the weekend by stating that the Government plan to introduce a referendum Bill setting out the rules under which they will permit the Scottish people a choice in their future again. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that is their intention? I remind her that if the arbitrary threshold suggested had been applied

[Deidre Brock]

to the Conservative leadership election, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) would not be Prime Minister, and that under it both the campaign to leave the EU and the Conservatives' 2019 election bid would have fallen well short in England, let alone in Scotland. Clearly the Government have not learned anything from the last time Scots were cheated out of a result in a referendum in—[*Interruption.*] In 1979. The good news for us is that such desperate attempts to rig our independence referendum expose the desperation in Unionist ranks. They know that when we hold that referendum, we are going to win it.

Mr Speaker: I gently say—everybody is doing it, but it is a new day—that the limit is two minutes and we were almost at three there.

Penny Mordaunt: I have made a schoolgirl error, I am afraid, because in my diligent preparation for these questions, I expected some questions relating to things that matter to the people of Scotland. Never mind—I hope for some in the coming weeks.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not feel able to celebrate the diversity of the new Cabinet. Despite her criticism of certain Members, the one thing that all members of the Cabinet believe in is holding to the results of referendums, which is an encouraging thing and something that I would recommend to her. We remain committed to our manifesto, and future business will be announced in the usual way.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to her position, which I am sure she will enjoy, and I am sure she will serve with great distinction.

Global awareness day of aortic dissection is on 19 September this year. Aortic dissection is a terrible and all too often preventable condition if it is diagnosed, and it has affected my family. It affects more than 2,000 families whose loved ones die every year in this country. Please will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time to mark this date and also ask my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary what her Department will do to educate health professionals so that aortic dissections are not misdiagnosed, including working closely with the Aortic Dissection Charitable Trust?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and commend the work that she has done in the wake of a terrible tragedy to spare other families what she has had to suffer. I will bring this matter to the attention of the new Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister. Some encouraging work has been done by the Royal Colleges of Radiologists and Emergency Medicine to help spot and diagnose this condition in emergency departments and I thank her again for her work.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I welcome the new Leader of the House to her place and look forward to working with her in the coming weeks and months. It is refreshing to see that the Deputy Leader of the House is still in his place.

May I also apologise, Mr Speaker, for being slightly late? I have just been meeting a delegation of United States congressmen and women.

We have an extensive queue of debate applications waiting for Chamber time—quite a long list—but we are very much still open for business particularly for applications that are seeking time for debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so we would welcome such applications. Some Members are already particularly helpful in this respect—some might say a little too helpful! But we are very much open for business and looking forward to those applications.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The work of the Backbench Business Committee is absolutely critical to enable Members to bring forward issues of concern to them. He will know from our conversation yesterday that I am looking at giving him early assurance of time both on the Floor of the House and in Westminster Hall and I will undertake to do that as swiftly as possible.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I press the Leader of the House a little bit on the energy debate, which is starting in probably less than an hour's time? I asked her yesterday about what information we would have. The written ministerial statement has not yet been laid; I hope that that will happen shortly. Furthermore, it is usual with a statement that, immediately the Minister making the statement sits down, a hard copy of that statement is distributed to Members. Can I have her assurance that, at the minimum, as soon as the Prime Minister has concluded her speech opening the debate, a hard copy of that speech will be circulated to MPs? It is a very significant announcement. We are expecting tens of billions of pounds, and Members need at least that level of detail to be able to debate it properly in the three-hour debate today.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this question both today and yesterday. I am very keen that Members of this House are given all the information they need to be able to fully participate in debates and to scrutinise Government policy. My understanding is that, because it is a general debate, that convention does not apply. However, we have raised this issue with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and that is the reason why a WMS will be tabled imminently, in good time for the debate this afternoon, and that will contain all the information that colleagues need.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for her positive response yesterday to my point of order. Will the Government consider having a debate on the private rented sector? It is one of the other key pressures on the cost of living crisis. I am pleased that the Government are—hopefully—about to deal with the energy crisis, but unless we deal with spiralling rents and ongoing evictions, people will suffer this winter. Will the Government bring forward a debate on this matter in Government time?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I would be happy to raise that matter with the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman will know from the Prime Minister's statement that the cost of living and related issues are a priority for this Government, and I will certainly take that up with the relevant Department.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I apologise for being slightly late because I had to hobble here as the result of a sprained ankle.

I hugely congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new post. I speak from experience when I say that it is the most brilliant job, and I am sure she will serve with great distinction. I also say a huge thank you to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). He was brilliant and funny as the Scottish Nationalists' spokesman all the way through, and I wish his successor much luck. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that she will give them no possibility of doing anything to tear apart our great United Kingdom while she remains Leader of the House?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that is my reputation. On the Government side of the House, we respect the results of referendums.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Last week in my constituency I visited an Afghan family who have been in a hostel for more than 10 months. My constituent has been prevented from earning a living and providing for their family. They have progressed with help from the health service in the form of antidepressants. What they need is the ability to work and to live in a home rather than two rooms. They do not wish to remain dependent on the state and at its mercy. Will the Leader of the House urge the new Home Secretary to make a statement on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue and I am happy to raise it with the Home Secretary. Work has been going on in other Departments to remove barriers and enable people to get into work—for example, in the NHS—once their paperwork is sorted, and to see how Jobcentre Plus can assist people. All ideas from Members are always gratefully received.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I congratulate my fellow Hampshire MP on her new role. She will be aware that junction 9 of the M3 is a key piece of road infrastructure in our part of the world, from the docks in Southampton to the rest of the country. It has been held up while we make new plans in preparation—or not—for smart motorways. The new Prime Minister has been clear about her opinion that smart motorways will not be proceeded with. Should National Highways now proceed—as it had planned to do—with the junction outside the all-running motorway plan?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Hampshire colleague for his kind remarks. He will know that the Department for Transport has been reviewing the progress of that work, and it is right that we look at the genuine concerns that have been raised about that new technology. The Department will continue its plan as outlined, but I will raise the matter on his

behalf with the new Secretary of State, because clearly his constituents and local business want some certainty on the timeframe.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Park home residents in Bath face soaring bills because their pitch fees are linked to the retail price index rather than the lower consumer price index. The previous Government committed to changing pitch fees in England if parliamentary time allowed. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that is still the case?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly raise the issue with the relevant Department and ask it to contact the hon. Lady. I take it that she has raised this issue with it before, and clearly she has a number of means to secure a debate. If she has any difficulty in getting an answer to her question, I will be happy to assist.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new job. She follows in illustrious footsteps: Sir Robert Walpole, both the Pitts—Elder and Younger—Disraeli, Gladstone and Churchill. I want to bring up something to ask for her help about a historic appointment in Somerset. Mohammed Saddiq will soon take up an official role that was created by Henry VIII. He will get to wear fancy dress, represent our ancient county and welcome visiting dignitaries. However, his day job is director of Wessex Water, a company guilty of pumping thousands of gallons of human filth into my rivers and across the levels. Last year he received £422,000, including a bonus, for what was actually called “protecting the environment”. Somerset needs to be consulted about such appointments, and so does the rest of the country. We are not asked about them. Can we please have a debate in Government time on senior appointments so that MPs can have input into them across the United Kingdom?

Penny Mordaunt: On the issue of storm overflows, my hon. Friend will know that we are the first Government to have introduced legislation to reduce such discharges. He will fully understand the reason why they are done; the consequences of not doing them would be appalling for our constituents. Critically, since 2016, when only 5% of such overflows were monitored, monitoring is now at 90% and next year it will be 100%. That is not the solution, but it is incredibly helpful to the public. I think that background is helpful in the case he raises. Clearly, he will be as concerned as all of us in this House to get those matters resolved swiftly. Finally, I point out that last year we fined water companies £100 million for not following their obligations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly welcome the right hon. Lady to her new job, not least because she got to be leader after all; historically, the leader of the Government was the Leader of the House in the House of Commons, as was just pointed out. Her job is really important in terms of, as she has said, restoring the reputation of this House. Much of that started to fall apart with the Owen Paterson debacle last November. I hope we can put that behind us—although she voted, of course, for the wrecking amendment at the time—and work together to try to bring forward the new code of conduct as soon as possible. It is simpler, it tightens up the rules and it provides fairness for all Members. There should not be a higher standard for us than for anybody

[Chris Bryant]

else in public life, but there should be standards in public life. I hope she will explain to us why she has pulled the debate that was meant to bring forward the new code of conduct next Wednesday.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and look forward to our first meeting, whichever one of us initiated it. I do take these matters very seriously—I hope that is my reputation—and I believe strongly that in this role, as well as serving my Government, I also serve this House. I understand the full importance of restoring trust and confidence in our politics. I want to have a conversation with him, but he will already know that we are very sympathetic to the measures in his report, and I am not looking to delay those matters; I want to fully understand them and get the background from him. I hope he will take that as positive.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I too warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to her new role. I thank Mr Speaker for agreeing yesterday to my request to hoist the Brazilian flag in New Palace Yard, because yesterday marked an important day in the Brazilian national calendar. I also thank him for receiving the Brazilian ambassador, Mr Fred Arruda. This is a moment of great pride for all Brazilians worldwide, but also for the large number of Brazilians who work on our estate. Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating yesterday's anniversary of Brazilian independence, in which Britain played a significant part 200 years ago, as we look forward to growing a strong strategic and trade relationship between our two great countries?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks and for giving me the opportunity to echo the statement that he has made. I suggest that he might wish to secure an Adjournment debate on this topic, and I thank him for all he is doing to strengthen our ties with Brazil.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Supported businesses such as Highland BlindCraft in Inverness rely on transitional support grants to help them to employ a wide range of people with disabilities and to help them to become valued members of our workforce. The grants are due to end in April. There has been no word from the Government about their replacement or any information about what is happening, and this is a critical time for these businesses in trying to plan. May we have a statement on when the situation will be rectified and when detail on the grants will be given?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to raise that specific issue with the relevant Secretary of State. One of our achievements has been to halve the disability employment gap. This continues to be of huge importance to the Government, and we want to do everything we can to enable that employment and others to continue.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House to her new role and congratulate her. When will we see leasehold reform on the Order Paper? This is a difficult, technical issue. We need to get it right, we need time to debate it, and there are people

suffering now as a result of abusive practices that need to be tackled. I do hope that we will see it on the Order Paper soon.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important point. I will take it up with the relevant Department and business will be announced in the usual way. I would also encourage her to use all the means that she will be very aware of to secure a debate on the issue, but I shall certainly raise it with the Department.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Several small to medium-sized businesses in Battersea have told me how much they are struggling with the cost of living crisis. Energy bills are soaring and business costs are rising, and then there are the supply chain and staffing issues as a consequence of Brexit. These small businesses are vital to our local economy and they need help now, so the Government must come forward with a plan of support that includes a contingency fund for these businesses. We need to see a cut in business rates and the energy price cap implemented sooner rather than later. May we have a statement outlining the Government plan to support small and medium-sized businesses?

Penny Mordaunt: That is the reason why we have given time for a general debate this afternoon. Many Members will have ideas about what support is needed and they will have the opportunity to raise them later today. We have moved Government business around to allow that to happen, and to allow measures to help the hon. Lady's businesses to be brought forward.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): May I take this opportunity to congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new position? The Prime Minister yesterday agreed with the Father of the House that local authorities should be allowed by planning law to protect what matters most of them. I believe that should apply as much to Doncaster Sheffield airport as it does to the green belt. The land that our airport sits on has planning consent for use as an airport. Does the Leader of the House agree that the owners, Peel Holdings, should not be able to close our airport and use the land for anything else?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on this issue, and I know that he has raised it many times. There are commercial decisions, which sit with the owners, about what their plans are, but I know that he is doing everything within his power to ensure a good outcome for his local constituents, and I am at his disposal if there is anything I can do to assist him in that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In the absence of today's cancelled debate, will the Leader of the House speak to her colleagues in the Home Office about restoring the Home Office hub that we previously had in Portcullis House? The biggest thief of time in my office is when caseworkers have to listen to a message on the helpline saying that there are more than five people waiting ahead of them. The Home Office has written to tell us that it will have a series of regional walk-in initiatives. Can she perhaps explain to the Home Office that the nearest one to my constituency is in Aberdeen, and that it will only be a walk-in service

when my caseworkers can walk on water? They do brilliant things, but I fear that is still a little bit beyond them.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. My office has already had some discussions with the Home Office about what service it can provide to hon. Members, which is vital. Rather than being a burden on it, Members of Parliament can be of great assistance in getting cases resolved, so I will happily do that.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Arctic ocean is heating four times faster than any other ocean in the world. The sea ice is melting and there is a whole range of other issues. The Arctic Council is not operating, and a whole series of issues is pending with regard to the Arctic, such as minerals and fisheries. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has promised a new Arctic policy document imminently—it says that it has been preparing it for quite a long time. Will my right hon. Friend, who I warmly welcome to her new post, find time for a Government debate on British relations with the Arctic, which could perhaps coincide with the launch of that new document?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, which has always been important, but is even more pressing now because of what is happening with Russia. I will bring it up with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I encourage him—although I know he needs no encouragement—to do all he can to secure time on the Floor of the House to debate that important issue.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I warmly welcome the appointment of the Leader of the House. I particularly look forward to the exchanges that I am sure we will have in the Procedure Committee, particularly on proxy voting, in the coming weeks.

At the weekend, a group of cyclists from my constituency and the constituency of the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) were doing a fundraiser for Prostate Cymru, travelling from Wales to Portugal. When they arrived at customs in Santander, their bikes were seized and they were asked to pay in excess of €10,000 to release the bikes for the fundraising effort. Clearly, that has had a huge impact on the fundraising; the cyclists ended up paying €8,500 to release the bikes, which the whole House will agree is appalling.

It appears that it was to do with a post-Brexit form linked to importers trying to sell goods in Spain, but clearly this was a cycling fundraising event. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could make representations to the Foreign Secretary about providing more support to charities such as Prostate Cymru about what forms need to be completed, and about working with the Spanish Government to ensure that does not happen again to much-needed funds for charities.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear of that. There is no reason why they should have had that difficulty—it is outrageous. I take this opportunity to remind hon. Members about the excellent consular service that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office runs. I had an incident where a constituent was in

real danger. Through the consular service, within half an hour of me making that initial call, the local police force in the United States was on that individual's doorstep. I encourage people to use that facility, and I will do all I can to help to resolve and get compensation for the group of cyclists the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new position; I know that she will do a fantastic job.

Sadly, I was not shocked by Sandwell Council's latest attempt to threaten and silence residents who are being let down by the Labour-run council. Residents who complain about their child's special educational needs and disabilities travel service now face their transport provision being removed for good. The council's latest terms and conditions reads:

"Please don't use social media to make a complaint as it may result in your child's transport being suspended or removed permanently."

That is after the scandal around those contracts being awarded on the basis of friendships. We have really hit a new low. Can the Leader of the House advise me on whether we can have a debate on Sandwell Council's ongoing SEND provision?

Penny Mordaunt: That is very shocking and sad to hear. It is absolutely the case that local authorities have a statutory duty to provide free home-to-school transport for eligible children of compulsory school age, and it would not be lawful for a local authority to withdraw transport from an eligible child on the grounds that a parent had complained—that is outrageous. My hon. Friend will know how to secure a debate, but I will raise the issue on her behalf with the relevant Department. It is a shocking indictment of that council.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the new Leader of the House. I am personally very pleased for her and I wish her all the very best in this role.

This morning, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency produced statistics showing that Northern Ireland has had 340 excess deaths in the last 10 weeks, which is a 16% increase over the last five years. That is obviously devastating for those families and for those people, and it is largely because of delayed diagnosis. The cancer statistics are still not published, which means that this figure will be even higher in the next few weeks. I wonder at what point in the crisis in the Northern Ireland health service the Health Secretary here will be able to step in with emergency provision and emergency organisation. Can the Leader of the House raise that urgently with the Health Secretary?

Penny Mordaunt: That is very hard to hear. One of the strengths of our national health service across the United Kingdom is that it is devolved and run in slightly different ways. I know that the chief medical officers work together very closely to share good practice, to learn from each other and to strengthen the system as a whole. I will certainly raise the hon. Member's concerns with the new Secretary of State, but he will know that we are doing everything we can to restore a Government in Northern Ireland so that these issues can be gripped and dealt with.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to her place, and I think she will be a fantastic champion for this House. I also welcome the speed with which the Government are bringing forward measures to address the energy crisis. Alongside that, the No. 1 issue in my inbox from constituents is the fate or the future of Worcester Warriors rugby club. Professional rugby has been played at Sixways for all of my adult life, but this is now under threat due to the dire financial situation at the club. Five Worcestershire MPs have together written to both the incoming and outgoing Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I am delighted—thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the Speaker has allowed an Adjournment debate on this issue on 19 September, but I fear that may be too late. We need urgent action by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as well as Premiership Rugby and the Rugby Football Union to save the future of this club. Are there any opportunities for me to raise this issue even sooner than Monday after next?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he and his local colleagues are doing to secure the club's future. He has done exactly as we would expect him to do in securing that debate, but time is of the essence. I will happily raise the issue on his behalf and ensure that the new Secretary of State realises it is a priority. We have previously assisted clubs, even if it is just by buying them a bit of time, and I know that the new Secretary of State will be keen to do all she can to assist.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Government have taken £4.4 billion from the mineworkers' pension scheme to date. The cross-party Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report concluded that the Government

"should not be in the business of profiting from mineworkers' pensions."

I and 50 colleagues wrote to the two leadership candidates last month about this, but we are yet to receive a reply, so can we have an urgent statement from this new Government on this scandal?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter. She can clearly raise it as a question to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or seek to secure a debate, but I would be happy to notify the Department that this is a concern to her and ask it to get in touch.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Before the recess, I raised the plight of Obaidullah Jabarkhyl, a young Afghan boy who became separated from his family when they fled Afghanistan. Very sadly, he ended up in Paris while the rest of the family ended up here. Over the last 12 months, his solicitor, the family and my office have been trying to get him reunited with his family. The good news is that yesterday he arrived at King's Cross and was reunited with his twin brother. However, this highlights the problems there are for Afghan refugees and others who are separated from their families across the world. Equally, 11,000 Afghan refugees are still in hotels in this country. May we have a debate in Government time on the plight of refugees,

and on how we can ensure that we can short-circuit this and get people into decent homes that they can make their own?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on these matters, and he continues to raise his concerns but also concerns shared by many Members of the House. I know that the new Home Secretary will be looking at these issues and asking other Government Departments to grip them. I would be happy to raise this issue on his behalf, and I will certainly encourage the Home Office, as I have mentioned, to be as helpful to Members of this House as possible in resolving these cases.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Marie Curie's Dying In Poverty campaign is calling for urgent action from the UK to safeguard terminally ill people and their families against poverty at the end of their lives. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her support for that campaign, and will she use her good offices to urge her Cabinet colleagues to do likewise, and put an end to the shameful indictment of our society where people die in poverty?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She will know that as part of today's business, Members will be able to make some progress on that. I know it is connected to a whole raft of things, and I will be happy to point the new Secretary of State towards the hon. Lady's concerns.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): There are not really enough hours in the day to speak about fishing and farming. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House please give Members more time in questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ask questions on rural affairs?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding all Members of the House of the vital importance of farming, fishing and rural affairs. I shall certainly talk to the new Secretary of State about his concerns.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the new Leader of the House and look forward to our Thursdays together. I remind her that some years ago, the lovely Cheryl Gillan managed to get the Autism Act 2009 through this place. May we have an early debate on the fact that autism is an important issue for so many families in this country? Up and down the country, many local authorities are ignoring that Act, failing to put it into operation, and leaving families in a dreadful state of despair.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding the House about one of the many services that Cheryl Gillan performed for this House in introducing that Act, which was supported by many Members of the House. It has been in operation for some time, and we should look at how it is performing. I encourage him to apply for a debate in the usual manner, and I will be happy to raise the issue with the several relevant Departments so that they can consider his request.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and welcome her to her new position. Following the shocking fire 10 days ago at beautiful Baggy Point in my stunning North Devon

constituency that was caused by a disposable barbecue blowing up from the beach on to the tinder-dry gorse, may we have an urgent debate in Government time to consider banning those dangerous and unnecessary items from our open spaces?

Penny Mordaunt: That was a particularly shocking incident. Natural fires are a tragedy in themselves, but it is very depressing when they are preventable and caused by such events. The Government are ensuring that disposable barbecues are safe and include clear instructions for use, but there is clearly a lack of awareness about what might happen. I thank my hon. Friend for raising awareness of that issue today. I know she will continue to do so, and I am happy to raise the matter with the relevant Department.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Keepmoat Homes built a new housing estate in my constituency, offering people dream homes. However, many constituents have had snagging issues that they have struggled to resolve. There was actually a land grab by Keepmoat, with some gardens being smaller than was shown in the title deeds of the houses purchased, and general upkeep of the estate is poor; it is strewn with weeds, and general maintenance is lacking. Adjacent land still owned by Keepmoat is effectively a wasteland. Keepmoat Homes keeps fobbing off my office and promising to get back to us, but it never does—of course it is making more money building houses elsewhere. May we have a statement from the Leader of the House about how we can hold those so-called reputable companies to account and make them fulfil their promises?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has certainly raised awareness of the conduct of that company on the Floor of the House, and he has done his constituents a service in the process. As he will know, he will perhaps be able to secure an Adjournment debate further to discuss what that business is and is not doing.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Earlier this week, Stoke City football club was proud to host our heroines, the Lionesses, as they stormed to a 10-nil victory over Luxembourg in a World cup qualifier, in front of a 24,000-strong crowd. It was a tremendous boost to the city of Stoke-on-Trent, and a great showcase for women's football. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Lionesses on their victory? Can we secure parliamentary time for a debate on how we can improve access and opportunity for girls and women across our country to get into football?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us again of the Lionesses' tremendous and continuing track record in bringing glory to our nation. I am happy to say that this week it was announced that former England and Great Britain footballer Karen Carney MBE is to chair an in-depth review into the future of domestic women's football that will look at how we deliver growth to both elite and grassroots level football. Next week, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on the 2022 UEFA European women's championship and participation of girls and young women in sport. I encourage all Members to contribute to that.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): On 25 August, my constituent Victoria Bowman and her husband were arrested in Myanmar for alleged visa offences as they returned to the city from Shan state. Ms Bowman served as the UK's ambassador to Myanmar, and the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business said that she has

"dedicated many years...to strengthen social and economic development in Myanmar."

She is an upstanding citizen who has served our country with distinction, and the charges appear to be politically motivated. Will the Leader of the House please discuss this with the Foreign Secretary and look at how we can urgently help my constituent and her husband?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue. I shall pass her concerns on to the Foreign Office, and I encourage her to make contact with the new Foreign Secretary to discuss the matter directly.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is great to see my right hon. Friend in her place as she takes up her position; I warmly congratulate her. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council was awarded £20 million by the Government for a family hub. We all know that a person's start in life can, unfortunately, still dictate where they go. We need to change that, and a family hub can do that. I am working alongside local campaigners to ensure that a family hub is located at Harvills Hawthorn Primary School in West Bromwich in my constituency. It has the site, the connections and the networks by which to build the hub; we just need to get Sandwell council on board. Will my right hon. Friend give us a debate in Government time and perhaps make representations in Government to support the campaign to get a family hub at Harvills Hawthorn Primary School?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, a former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is in her place, has done a huge amount of work on early years and encouraging family hubs, and he is right to campaign so hard for one in his constituency. I would be happy to help him achieve that objective. This particular council is featuring greatly in today's business questions, so perhaps hon. Members should club together in applying for a debate, whether on denying transport to people who have special educational needs or on the blocking of family hubs.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This week, I received a rather predictable response from the Home Office. It said, "Thank you for your further inquiry on behalf of X, about his application for Y. X's application is under consideration and we will contact him as soon as a decision is reached." It was predictable because I get the same response every time I contact the Home Office.

This week, the Home Office sent Members a letter saying that it will now contact our offices by telephone to update them, not by email. Call me a cynic, but with that we lose the paper trail of email updates. Can we have a Government statement on what is being done about the unacceptable delays in Home Office correspondence and applications from our constituents?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If we are to get everybody in, we do need quite short questions.

Penny Mordaunt: I am aware of the correspondence that the Home Office has sent out, and I very much doubt whether it had any ministerial oversight. I have raised it with the Home Office and said that our view is that that is not an acceptable service for Members. I think the Home Office does not understand how having a letter with a substantive answer is very helpful to Members in getting information to their constituents. I have raised that with both the Home Office and the Cabinet Office, and I will do all that I can to ensure that Members of this House get the service that they and their constituents need.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new position on the Front Bench. Some 28,000 migrants have now crossed the channel this year. I am afraid that our inability to control our borders is becoming increasingly difficult to defend to my constituents. Can we expect a statement from the new Home Secretary on this issue and on the further measures the Government will be taking to address it?

Penny Mordaunt: I think we can expect to hear from the new Home Secretary soon on these matters. It is a key priority for her. In addition to statements, we will also see action.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Leader of the House to her important new role and I wish her well with it. I suspect she has been studiously looking at the commitments the Prime Minister made over the summer, so she will know that, in a speech in Leeds on 28 July, the Prime Minister committed to build the northern powerhouse rail link to join up communities and unlock potential right across the north. That is hugely significant for the north of England, and I know that the metro Mayor in West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, and in South Yorkshire, Oliver Coppard, are very keen to talk to the Government. Can the Leader of the House speak to the new Transport Secretary so we can get early sight of the Government's intentions in this regard?

Penny Mordaunt: Like the hon. Gentleman, I was very pleased to hear that commitment from our new Prime Minister. The timing but also the sequencing of these various schemes will be of huge interest to many Members, and I think it is a prime topic for a debate. I encourage him to apply for one.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On 13 May, almost four months ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about a constituent who suffered a serious sexual assault at the hands of a medical professional. My research has shown that there is no support available for such people, no progress on implementing the recommendations of three inquiries and no systematic collection of data. I chased up the Secretary of State on 21 July, on 10 August and yesterday, on 7 September. Will the Leader of the House please confirm that she will now write to the new Secretary of State and ensure that my constituent, who has been incredibly courageous, will get a response to my letter of almost four months ago?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the case of the hon. Lady's constituent. I shall certainly raise the matter and draw it to the attention of the new Secretary of State.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I wish the Leader of the House well in her new role—it is obviously an apprenticeship for the top job. On the steps of Downing Street this week, the new Prime Minister failed to mention Wales once. That has not gone unnoticed in Wales and in my constituency of Newport West. May we have a debate in Government time on the lessons the Conservative party can learn from the long-term and successful Welsh Labour Government, because there are plenty of them?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I would slightly take issue with the success rate of the Welsh Government on a number of fronts, but in the spirit of co-operation I encourage her to apply for a debate so we can have that discussion on the Floor of the House.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I have requested meetings with the Home Office to discuss the exceptional case of a young woman from Afghanistan who has been offered a place to study nursing at the University of Dundee. This is an urgent case, and it is vital that it is resolved prior to the start of her course this month. I also understand that it is on the ministerial desk awaiting approval. Can the Leader of the House advise Members on what they can do to raise urgent cases with Ministers, and will she help to facilitate a meeting for me with colleagues in the Home Office?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall be happy to facilitate meetings if the hon. Gentleman is having difficulty securing them. As I said today and yesterday, I am sure the Home Office will want to give clarity on precisely the support it will give Members to resolve such issues.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Given the new Leader of the House's experience of the fantastic Inspire sports centre in Luton South, may I ask her to join me in congratulating Amy Rollinson from Luton Diving Club on her bronze medal at the Commonwealth games? In view of the devastating floods in Pakistan—a third of the country is under water, 35 million people are affected and over 1,200 people are dead—please may we have an urgent debate about UK aid to Pakistan?

Penny Mordaunt: I happily join the hon. Lady in her congratulations on the achievements in diving in her constituency. She will know that we have given many millions in aid money to help the situation in Pakistan. Our high commission there is doing all it can to assist the Pakistan Government with the very difficult circumstances they are facing. I encourage her and others to apply for debates in the usual manner.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): A remedial order can take effect only 60 sitting days after it has been laid. We have been waiting far too long for a second remedial order to be laid for bereavement support payments for cohabiting couples. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the Government plan to lay that second remedial order?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very aware that, because this relates to sitting days, it is a longer period of time, and hon. Members have raised many issues today that need to be dealt with swiftly. I am having discussions with my team and the Deputy Leader of the House about how we can ensure that the measures that are urgently needed are brought forward in the swiftest possible time.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Delays to cancer treatment can be a matter of life and death, yet the Government are still not meeting seven of the nine urgent referral cancer targets. Can we have a debate in Government time about how we can improve the situation for those awaiting cancer treatment?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Much of the waiting list pressure that the NHS is under is because of diagnostics, and I know that this will be a key focus for the new Secretary of State. I encourage him to apply for a debate in the usual manner.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the Leader of the House on her appointment.

My constituency celebrates two very important anniversaries this year: first, the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the “Sons of the Rock”, Dumbarton FC, which two members of my family have played for; and secondly, of course, the 800th anniversary of the royal borough of Dumbarton, which was founded by our late king, Alexander II—by the grace of God, King of Scots. Will the Leader of the House congratulate not only Dumbarton FC, but the people of Dumbarton on their ancient history? Does she also agree that it is about time that we recognised the value of sport and our great boroughs across these islands?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in his congratulations on both those achievements, and I wish them well in future years.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Shamefully, unnecessary delays to the Online Safety Bill have allowed dangerous misogyny and right-wing extremism to perpetuate online for far too long. We know that young boys are especially susceptible to that, and more and more are turning to the dark web in an attempt to find a place of belonging and acceptance. Will the Leader of the House therefore commit to a debate in Government time to look at how we can tackle that way of radicalisation before it is too late?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue and point her to the remarks that the Prime Minister made yesterday about our commitment to that Bill. Its progress is very important and Members will be able to contribute to that. If she wishes to have a further debate, I encourage her to apply for one in the usual way.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I pay tribute to all firefighters in Stockport and across the country who work in very difficult conditions to keep people safe. Shockingly, data from the Fire Brigades Union shows that between 2010 and 2021, we lost 631 full-time firefighter roles in Greater Manchester. This is unacceptable and poses a real threat to the public where fire and

rescue services may not be able to deal with every incident and fight all fires. As the new Prime Minister starts her term, there is a real opportunity to properly invest in the fire services again, so will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on funding for the fire and rescue services in Greater Manchester in the light of the years of cuts?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. These matters are for local people to decide, but clearly, the shape of the fire service is changing. It is taking on additional roles, as well as its traditional ones, and that will be a concern for many Members across the House. I encourage him to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): According to a UK Finance report, push payment fraud rose by 39% last year. That is no surprise to me, having spent the summer discussing this issue with affected constituents. More teeth are needed. We need to find a way to make sure that we have proper redress for the consumers and businesses affected and a way of dealing with the banks that are hosting the accounts that are benefiting from this high-value fraud. Can we have a debate in Government time on what more can be done here to make sure that we put an end to this very damaging and increasing fraud?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important issue that I know has been a focus for the Treasury in recent months. If she applies for a debate, I am sure that many hon. Members will wish to contribute.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This Sunday marks World Suicide Prevention Day. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and I met Matthew from If U Care Share, who has been raising funds to support the work of the charity by running from Durham to 10 Downing Street. May I ask for a debate in Government time so that we can discuss suicide and self-harm prevention and the Government's revision of the strategy?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important issue. I wish her constituent well in his mission to raise awareness of and funds for this important cause. I will happily raise the issue with the relevant Secretary of State. I am sure that if the hon. Lady secures a debate—I encourage her to apply for one—many Members of this House will wish to contribute.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Over the summer, my office—like those of many hon. Members, I am sure—has continued to experience considerable delays in contacting the MP account management team at UK Visas and Immigration and the Passport Office. Twice in the past few days, my staff have spent more than two hours on the phone getting through to an adviser, and then the adviser has only been reading out from a screen and has not been able to give information or assistance with complex cases. Please will the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time about what action the Government can take to ensure that hon. Members are provided with support so that we, in turn, can give that support to our constituents?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Office has done a huge amount to improve the service. In recent months, it has taken on more than 1,000 new staff to process such applications. However, he is right that there is no point in having a service and hotline for MPs if there are not answers at the end. I shall certainly continue to ensure that the Home Office can deliver the services that Members of this House need and would welcome.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My office is currently supporting several single mothers who continue to struggle with the child maintenance system, because support with chasing down parents who are avoiding paying and with enforcing repayment of large arrears just does not exist in a meaningful way in the current system. Will the Leader of the House ask the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement to the House on improving the system for my constituents and for the many single parents across the UK who are single-handedly carrying the financial and emotional burden of raising their children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the matter. I will happily pass on her concerns to the new Secretary of State. Questions to the Department for Work and Pensions are scheduled for 17 October; I encourage the hon. Lady to raise the issue then as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups for the Pakistani minorities and for international freedom of religion or belief. I note with concern the horrific floods, devastation and loss of life in Pakistan over recent weeks. I am glad to hear of the various initiatives from this Government to deliver aid to alleviate the impact of the damage on people's lives. Will the Leader of the House allow a statement on the importance of that aid reaching all those in need in Pakistan, particularly those who belong to other religious groups such as Christians and Ahmadis, who face systemic challenges in receiving the aid that they very much need?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that historically the largest share of our aid budget has gone to Pakistan. As a consequence, we have a deep and well-informed relationship with respect to how that aid money is utilised; I know that our high commission there will ensure not only that it is distributed to give the maximum positive impact for everyone, but that there is no discrimination in how it is distributed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to UK Energy Costs not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order; proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Joy Morrissey:*)

UK Energy Costs

Mr Speaker: Before we start the debate, I want to put on record that I am very disappointed that a written ministerial statement that is relevant to it has only just been made available, in the last five minutes. Such statements should be made available, whenever possible, at 9.30 am. When they are relevant to a debate, as is the case today, it is doubly important for them to be available in good time. I am sorry that this has happened. I consider it to be discourteous to the House, and I hope that is not the way the new Government intend to treat the House. Rather than judging it to be deliberate, I will put it down to bad management or incompetence.

We now come to the general debate on UK energy costs. Before I call the Prime Minister to open the debate—[*Interruption.*] This is not the day for that, given the way the House has been treated. I am defending Back Benchers and I expect a little more decorum from you.

Before I call the Prime Minister to open the debate, I should point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of her opening speech is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

11.40 am

The Prime Minister (Elizabeth Truss): I beg to move, That this House has considered UK Energy Costs. Earlier this week—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Just one second, Prime Minister. We have started the debate, and I do not want to hear any more from that particular Bench. If I do, I will go and get that cup of tea early.

The Prime Minister: Earlier this week, I promised that I would deal with the soaring energy prices faced by families and businesses across the UK, and today I am delivering on that promise. This Government are moving immediately to introduce a new energy price guarantee that will give people certainty on energy bills, and will curb inflation and boost growth. The guarantee—which includes a temporary suspension of green levies—means that from 1 October a typical household will pay no more than £2,500 per year for each of the next two years, while we get the energy market back on track. It will save a typical household £1,000 a year, and it comes in addition to the £400 energy bills support scheme. It supersedes the Ofgem price cap, and has been agreed with energy retailers.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will give way in a few minutes, when I have made some progress.

We will deliver this by securing the wholesale price for energy, while putting in place long-term measures to secure future supplies at more affordable rates. We are supporting the country through this winter and next, and tackling the root causes of high prices, so that we are never in this position again.

Mr Dhesi *rose*—

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) *rose*—

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *rose*—

Hon. Members: Sit down!

The Prime Minister: For those using heating oil, those living in park homes or those on heat networks, we will set up a fund—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry about this, Prime Minister. Can I just say that I do want a running commentary from Members giving me advice? I certainly do not need it.

I do not want to interrupt you, Prime Minister—it is up to you to give way when you feel it is appropriate—but I just want to let you know that the written ministerial statement has now been printed, and I hope it will be brought into the Chamber for everybody to see.

The Prime Minister: As I was saying, for those using heating oil, those living in park homes or those on heat networks, we will set up a fund so that all UK consumers can benefit from equivalent support.

Alan Brown *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Alan Brown: National Energy Action estimates that with the cap at the current level, 6.5 million households are in fuel poverty. If the level is raised to £2,500, how many more millions of people does the Prime Minister reckon will end up in fuel poverty?

The Prime Minister: We are taking action to help people on the lowest incomes through universal credit, and we are also supplying £400 through the energy bills support scheme.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I would like to make some progress, and then I will take more interventions.

We will also support all businesses, charities and public sector organisations with their energy costs this winter, offering an equivalent guarantee for six months. After those six months, we will provide further support for vulnerable sectors, such as hospitality, including our local pubs. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will work with business to review where that should be targeted to ensure that those most in need get support. The review will be concluded within three months, giving businesses certainty. In the meantime, companies with the wherewithal need to be looking for ways to improve energy efficiency and increase direct energy generation.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way and commend her on the speed with which she and her new team have really gripped the challenge that is facing the country. Does that not demonstrate that Conservative Governments do not stand by while millions of people on low incomes are struggling? I strongly support the measures she is announcing today.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I recognise that people are struggling with their energy bills and that is why I have brought forward this debate as soon as possible to give people reassurance ahead of the winter that energy bills are going to be affordable.

We will bring forward emergency legislation to deliver the policy. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out the expected costs as part of his fiscal statement later this month. I can tell the House today that we will not give in to the Leader of the Opposition, who calls for this to be funded through a windfall tax. That would undermine the national interest by discouraging the very investment we need to secure home-grown energy supplies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: If hon. Members will allow me to make a bit more progress, I may be able to answer their questions before they have asked them.

The Opposition need to understand—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Copies of the written ministerial statement have been made available to some Members, but there are not enough for everybody—*[Interruption.]* If I might finish my point of order: is it possible for sufficient copies to be made so that we can all see the statement?

Mr Speaker: As we both know, that is not a point of order, but it is certainly a clarification that the copies are now coming out. We are printing them as fast as possible to make sure that all Members have the ability to read them. It is with great disappointment that we are doing so, but that is a matter of fact.

The Prime Minister: Instead of taking the Opposition's approach, we are taking an approach that is pro-growth, pro-business and pro the investment we need for our country's energy security.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that we are too short of energy but have plenty of taxes, and that if we had an over-supply of taxes, as the Labour party wants, we would have less supply of the things we were taxing?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The reality is that we cannot tax our way to growth. The policy that I am setting out today is all about helping people with their energy costs, as I promised, and making sure that we have the long-term energy supplies that we need for our country.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Just six months ago, households faced energy bills of £1,300. We are today being told that fixing prices at £2,500 is the best the Government can do. It is not, so why is the Prime Minister putting private energy profits ahead of people at this crucial time?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is the important work to help people and businesses get through this winter and next winter while fixing Britain's long-term energy supply.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I have already given way on a number of occasions. I will give way later, and ask Members to hold off a bit longer.

This is the moment to be bold. We are facing a global energy crisis and there are no cost-free options. There will be a cost to this intervention.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this package, which is a marked contrast to the meagre scraps offered by the Opposition. I also welcome my right hon. Friend's confirmation that schools and colleges will be helped with their energy bills, as colleges face increases of 300%. Will she continue to bear down on fuel duty, because we know that motorists face extortionate bills when they fill up their car at the pumps?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point. I am sure that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is listening intently to his point ahead of the fiscal statement later this month.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I want to make some progress on explaining how we will defray the cost of this intervention, which I think might answer some hon. Members' questions before they ask them.

We will defray the cost of this intervention by, first, ramping up supply. Following on from the successful vaccine taskforce, we have created a new energy supply taskforce under the leadership of Maddy McTernan. The taskforce is already negotiating new long-term energy contracts with domestic and international gas suppliers to bring down the cost of intervention immediately.

We are also accelerating all sources of domestic energy, including North sea oil and gas production. We will be launching a new licensing round, which we expect to lead to more than 100 new licences being awarded; and we will speed up our deployment of all clean and renewable technologies, including hydrogen, solar, carbon capture and storage, and wind, where we are already a world leader in offshore generation. Renewable and nuclear generators will move on to contracts for difference, to end the situation in which electricity prices are set by the marginal price of gas. This will mean that generators receive a fair price that reflects their cost of production, further bringing down the cost of this intervention.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I warmly welcome the immediate action announced by the Prime Minister on the cost of energy, which will help families in my Pendle constituency and right across the United Kingdom. Next week is nuclear week in Parliament, so will she join me in supporting the roll-out of small modular reactors championed by Rolls-Royce, which has two sites in my constituency? We need this technology now, so will she go further and faster in driving forward the nuclear programme in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that small modular reactors are a very important part of our energy mix. They are produced here in the United Kingdom. They will help to boost growth as well as boosting our energy security.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will take a few more interventions in a few minutes, but I ask Members please to let me make progress on my speech.

Secondly, today's actions will deliver substantial benefits to our economy—boosting growth, which increases tax receipts, and giving certainty to business. This intervention is expected to curb inflation by up to five percentage points, bringing a reduction in the cost of servicing Government debt.

Thirdly, I am announcing today that, with the Bank of England, we will set up a new scheme worth up to £40 billion to ensure that firms operating in the wholesale energy market have the liquidity they need to manage price volatility. This will stabilise the market and decrease the likelihood of energy retailers needing our support, as they did last winter.

By increasing supply, boosting the economy and increasing liquidity in the market, we will significantly reduce the cost to Government of this intervention.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is very kind of the Prime Minister to give way to so many sensible Members.

Today is clearly a big intervention, and the Government are, as she promised, wrapping their arms around my constituents, as we did during the pandemic. Looking to the future, can she confirm that the plans are primarily about domestic supply rather than imported reliance and are therefore in line with the important commitments we made at COP26 in Glasgow and with our commitment to the path to net zero made in our manifesto three years ago?

The Prime Minister: I am completely committed to net zero by 2050 and I will be saying more about how we will be achieving that later in this speech.

As well as dealing with the immediate situation we face, we are also dealing with the root causes.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to her place and hope she will work with Opposition parties in the national interest. Will she confirm that her announcement today will still see the energy bills of struggling families rising by another £500 next month and that this winter they will be paying energy bills that are twice those they paid last winter?

The Prime Minister: At the same time as introducing the energy price guarantee, we are also providing families with £400 and providing extra support to the vulnerable. Vulnerable families will be receiving that extra support.

I want to move on to why we are in the situation we are in now. The fact is that energy policy over the past decades has not focused enough on securing supply. *[Interruption.]* I do not know why the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) is laughing, as he is partly responsible for this. There is no better example than nuclear, where the UK has not built a single new nuclear reactor in 25 years. This is not just about supply; the regulatory structures have failed, exposing the problems of a price cap applied to the retail but not the wholesale market. All of that has left us vulnerable to volatile global markets and malign

actors in an increasingly geopolitical world. That is why Putin is exploiting this situation by weaponising energy supplies as part of his illegal war on Ukraine.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister accept that with 150 years' worth of gas under the ground in Great Britain it is absolute madness to turn our back on that resource at a time when people are facing huge energy bills? Will she also explain how she intends to deliver the support that she is talking about in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman and I am coming to the point about shale gas in a minute. I can assure him that this policy will apply in Northern Ireland and those benefits will be open to the people of Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom.

As well as the action that I am announcing today, we will use these two years ahead of us to make sure that the United Kingdom is never in this situation again. I will be launching two reviews. The first is a review of energy regulation to fix the underlying problems. We want a new approach that will address supply and affordability for the long term. Secondly, we will conduct a review to ensure we deliver net zero by 2050 in a way that is pro-business and pro-growth. That review will be led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore).

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): First, on behalf of the people of South Leicestershire, may I welcome my right hon. Friend to her role? She mentions Putin. The measures she is announcing today are incredibly welcome for my constituents and all our constituents, in order to protect in particular the poorest and most vulnerable in society, but will she give an assurance today that her Government will continue to stand firm against the appalling and brutal actions of Putin and his thuggish regime? Will she tell the British people honestly that we are in for a difficult winter, notwithstanding the challenges that face us?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: the reason we are in this difficult situation is Putin's appalling war in Ukraine. But we do need to make sure that our energy supplies are more resilient and secure, so that we are never in this situation again and so that we cannot be subject to global energy prices and the actions of dictators.

We are delivering a stable environment that gives investors the confidence to back gas as part of our transition to net zero. It is vital that we take steps to increase our domestic energy supply.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I will make a bit more progress and then I will give way.

We will end the moratorium on extracting our huge reserves of shale, which could get gas flowing as soon as six months from now where there is local support for it. We will launch Great British Nuclear later this month, putting us on a path to deliver up to a quarter of our electricity generation with nuclear by 2050.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. Last September, I asked the then Business Secretary, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), why the Government signed off on the closure of the Rough gas storage facility. He dismissed it as not relevant and accused me of stoking panic and alarm. The Government are reportedly now reopening that facility. That does not suggest that the new Chancellor is a man of foresight and strategy, does it, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We are in a very difficult situation and I am committed, as Prime Minister, to doing everything it takes to resolve the situation, to helping people with their energy bills and to making sure we have security of supply for the long term.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I have taken a lot of interventions and need to make progress on the speech.

As a result of these steps on shale and nuclear, and the acceleration of renewables, I am today setting a new ambition for our country. Far from being dependent on the global energy market and the actions of malign actors, we will make sure that the UK is a net energy exporter by 2040. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will set out a plan in the next two months to make sure we achieve that.

I know that businesses and families are very concerned about how they will get through this winter. That is why I felt it was important to act urgently to provide immediate help and support, as well as to set out our plan for how we will secure the UK's future energy supplies. This is part of my vision for rebuilding our economy. Secure energy supply is vital to growth and prosperity, yet it has been ignored for too long. I will end the UK's short-termist approach to energy security and supply once and for all. That is what I promised on the steps of Downing Street. Today, we are acting decisively on that pledge. This will help us build a stronger, more resilient and more secure United Kingdom. I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: A lot of Members wish to get in, so think of others once we have got through the Front Benchers.

12.3 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her opening speech.

We are in the middle of a national emergency. People are really scared, families do not know if they can warm their homes this winter and businesses ask if they can keep the lights on. That is why the Labour party spent the summer fighting for a price freeze, so that no household would pay a penny more on their bills. When we called for it, many people said we were wrong. They pretended that this crisis was something that just affected the poorest, as if working families on average wages could easily shoulder astronomical bills. They dismissed our call for support as "handouts". But those objections could never last; the Prime Minister had no choice. No Government can stand by while millions of families fall

[Keir Starmer]

into poverty, while businesses shut their doors and while the economy falls to ruin. So I am pleased that there is action today and that the principle of a price limit has been accepted, but under our plan there will be not a penny more on bills; under this plan, there will be a price rise.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will just make some progress and then I will give way.

This support does not come cheap. The real question before the House today—the real question the Government face; the political question—is who is going to pay. The Treasury estimates that energy producers could make £170 billion in unexpected windfall profits over the next two years. Let me repeat that: £170 billion in unexpected windfall profits over the next two years.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in just a moment.

The head of BP has called this crisis “a cash machine” for his company. Households are on the other end of that cash machine—their bills are funding these eye-watering profits. That is why we have been calling for a windfall tax since January, and it is why we want to see the windfall tax expanded now, but the Prime Minister is opposed to windfall taxes. She wants to leave these vast profits on the table, with one clear and obvious consequence: the bill will be picked up by working people. She claims that a windfall tax will deter investment. That is ridiculous. These vast profits are not the reward for careful planning. They are the unexpected windfall from Putin’s barbarity in Ukraine. There is no reason why taxing them would affect investment in the future.

Do not just take my word for it. Asked which investment BP would cancel if there were a windfall tax, the chief executive said, “None”—his word, not mine. The Prime Minister’s only argument against the windfall tax falls apart at first inspection, laying bare the fact that she is simply driven by dogma, and it is working people who will pay for that dogma.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that this Government have already introduced a windfall tax, and energy companies today are paying 65% on their profits? What would he rather see that tax set at?

Keir Starmer: We are talking about what happens this winter and next. If the hon. Gentleman does not understand—[*Interruption.*] I will tell him something. Every pound the Prime Minister’s Government refuse to raise in windfall taxes, which is leaving billions on the table, is an extra pound of borrowing. That is the simple, straightforward argument. Every pound that she leaves on the table is an extra pound of borrowing, loading the burden of the cost of living crisis onto working people who will have to pay back for years to come.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been careful to frame her guarantee in terms of her refusal to tax, but will she not have a problem explaining to the British people how a levy on their bills in the future to repay the borrowing is not actually a tax?

Keir Starmer: This is the basic political divide. The Government want to protect the excess profits of the oil and gas and energy groups; we want to protect working people.

Mr Perkins: This Saturday, I and many members of Chesterfield Labour party will be out meeting voters in Chesterfield. If any of those voters have not been paying attention this week, they might still say, “You’re all the same.” But is it not absolutely clear now that there is a clear divide? When I knock on doors, every voter will know that political parties have a choice. The Government have chosen to be on the side of the energy generators; we have chosen to be on the side of bill payers.

Keir Starmer: I would be absolutely amazed if Government Members have not picked that up. Ask voters whether they think it is fair that they pick up the bill, rather than those companies that made profits they did not expect to make. There is only one answer to that question. It is a very simple question of whose side are you on.

I am afraid this is not a one-off. Not only is the Prime Minister refusing to extend the windfall tax; she is choosing to cut corporation tax—an extra £17 billion in tax cuts for companies that are already doing well. That means handing a tax cut to the water companies polluting our beaches, handing tax cuts to the banks and handing a tax cut to Amazon. She is making that choice, even though households and public services need every penny they can get. Working people are paying for the cost of living crisis, stroke victims are waiting an hour for an ambulance and criminals walk the streets with impunity. It is the wrong choice for working people; it is the wrong choice for Britain.

Mr Dhesi: The Government appear to have decided to deal with this energy crisis on the backs of ordinary hard-working Brits, and to load huge levels of debt on to future generations, rather than properly taxing the billions of pounds of excess profits of the energy companies. Why are the Government on the side of big corporate rather than ordinary hard-working Brits? Is it because the Prime Minister is a former employee of Shell and is therefore on the side of oil and gas companies instead of protecting ordinary working British people?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. It comes down to this basic point. All hon. Members recognise that profits are needed for investment in all businesses, but in this case these are profits that the companies did not expect to make. When the chief executive of BP says that the windfall tax would not deter any investment, it is a bit rich for Government Members to say that he is completely wrong. He is the chief executive of BP. He has made his case and it is the complete opposite of the case the Prime Minister is trying to make.

The immediate cause of this energy crisis is Putin’s grotesque invasion of Ukraine. We stand united in our support for Ukraine. If we are to defend democracy, defeat imperialism and preserve security on our continent, Putin’s aggression must fail. Whatever our political differences, the Prime Minister will always have my full support in that common endeavour. But we must ask ourselves why we are so exposed to changes in the international price of oil and gas. Why are we so at the

mercy of dictators able to pull the plug on wells and shut down pipelines? Why is there such a fundamental flaw in our national security?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will make my argument and then I will give way.

It is about a failure to prepare, a failure to increase our energy independence and a failure to rapidly decrease our reliance on fossil fuels. The Conservatives banned onshore wind in 2015, and that cost us clean energy capacity equivalent to all our Russian gas imports in recent years—a policy disaster. The Prime Minister has been consistently opposed to solar power, the cheapest form of energy we have, and she has been consistently wrong. It is not just what the Prime Minister said in the heat of her leadership campaign this summer. When she was Environment Secretary, the Government slashed solar subsidies and the market crashed.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition is being completely misleading, if I may say so. It is under this Government that the United Kingdom has the second highest offshore wind generation capacity of anywhere in the world. How is that created? It is through investment by companies, and this Government will allow for that to happen.

Keir Starmer: I take it from that intervention that the hon. and learned Gentleman does not quarrel with me that the ban on onshore wind since 2015 has been a policy disaster, along with the opposition to solar power.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will of course take the former Prime Minister's intervention.

Mrs May: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is talking about lack of preparation for the United Kingdom's energy security. If Labour is so worried about that, why did it not build any new nuclear capacity?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and I will deal with it in full, because it is a very important point. Nuclear is vital to our future, and a new generation of power plants should have been built by now. Yesterday, the Prime Minister desperately tried to blame Labour, and that intervention goes to that point. I remember the exchange across the Dispatch Box in 2006 when Prime Minister Blair said that he was pro-nuclear, and the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, did not know where to look. If Members have not seen the clip, they should have a look. The uncomfortable truth for Members opposite is that the last Labour Government gave the go-ahead for new nuclear sites in 2009. In the 13 long years since then, not one has been completed.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Tony Blair may have said that he was pro-nuclear, but he did not actually build any nuclear power stations.

On the windfall tax and the £170 billion that the Leader of the Opposition mentioned, it is my understanding that most of that is not profits of UK companies but from energy supplied to the UK, and it is not within our

ability to tax it. We already have a windfall tax that taxes those profits at 65%. How high does he think a windfall tax should go?

Keir Starmer: What was the Conservative party's position on nuclear when David Cameron was asked the question in 2006? He did not have a position on it. I think the right hon. Gentleman is wrong about the £170 billion. If there is any doubt, I invite the Treasury to disclose the documents so that we can all evaluate them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not the bigger point that there is a simple choice about how to pay for this? It either all goes on borrowing, ordinary families and the never-never, or at least some of it is paid for by a windfall tax on unearned and unexpected income which Putin has put into the pockets of Shell and BP. That is the fundamental choice.

Keir Starmer: That is the fundamental choice and the fundamental divide in the House. Let the Conservatives defend their position of protecting those excess profits, and we will defend our position of standing up for working people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress: I have taken a lot of interventions.

Let me turn to home insulation, which reduces energy consumption like nothing else. We have the draughtiest homes in Europe. The last Labour Government set about fixing that. Then the Conservative party said, "cut the green crap", and the whole project all but collapsed. Installation rates fell by 92%—utterly short-sighted, and costing millions of households £1,000 a year on their energy bills right now.

The Prime Minister is right to recognise that immediate support needs to be combined with longer term action. Fracking and a dash for gas in the North sea will not cut bills, nor strengthen our energy security, but they will drive a coach and horses through our efforts to fight the looming climate crisis. The Prime Minister should listen to her Chancellor, who is sitting next to her. What did he have to say on fracking just a few months ago? I see him leaning forward. This is a long quote, and I have tried to cut it down, but every sentence is worth repeating.

"Those calling for its return misunderstand the situation we find ourselves in...if we lifted the fracking moratorium, it would take up to a decade to extract sufficient volumes—and it would come at a high cost for communities and our precious countryside."

Those are his words. I will go on, because this is so good. He said, just a few months ago:

"Second, no amount of shale gas from hundreds of wells dotted across rural England would be enough to lower the European price any time soon."

He went on:

"And with the best will in the world, private companies are not going to sell the shale gas they produce to UK consumers below the market price. They are not charities".

Spot on, Chancellor.

What did the Chancellor have to say about North sea gas at the same time? He said that,

"additional North Sea production won't materially affect the wholesale price".

[*Keir Starmer*]

Indeed, earlier this year his previous Department helpfully put out a series of Government myth-busting documents. Here is one of them—Chancellor, your document:

“MYTH: Extracting more North Sea gas lowers prices.”

Answer:

“FACT: UK production isn’t large enough to materially impact the global price of gas”.

I have a copy for the Prime Minister.

We do need to carefully manage our existing resources in the North sea, and the industry has an important role to play in our future as we transition to a different form of energy, but doubling down on fossil fuels is a ludicrous answer to a fossil fuel crisis. If all countries took the approach advocated by the Prime Minister’s new Energy Secretary of squeezing “every last drop” out of their fossil fuel reserves, global temperatures would rise by a catastrophic 3°. That would be devastating for our planet and for future generations, and it is totally unnecessary.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress, because other speakers need to get in.

New wind and solar power are now nine times cheaper—nine times cheaper! We need a clean energy sprint, urgently accelerating the rollout of offshore wind, onshore wind, solar, nuclear, hydrogen, and tidal. Last year, I set out a new national mission to insulate 19 million homes and cut bills for good. If the Government had taken me up on that challenge, 2 million homes would already be insulated by this winter.

Britain needs a fresh start. We need a Government who will never leave working people to pick up the tab for excess profits in the energy industry. We need a Government who plan for the long term rather than leaving us badly exposed to the whims of dictators, and we need a Government who will drive us forward to energy independence rather than doubling down on fossil fuels. The change we need is not the fourth Tory Prime Minister in six years; it is a Labour Government.

12.22 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on acting so swiftly to bring forward a package of support for people with their energy bills. There is no doubt, as every Member of this House knows, that that is a matter of real concern for people in my constituency and every other constituency, who have been worried about how they will heat their homes, and businesses that have been worried about how they can continue to operate.

I also welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend has coupled action on energy bills with action on energy security. The vicious further invasion of Ukraine by Russia has indeed shown the necessity of our having our own energy security, although it makes sense anyway. We have made important progress on that over recent years; I refer, of course, to the investment in Hinkley Point C, and I again welcome the commitment that my

right hon. Friend and the Government have made to continuing that support for nuclear energy. As I pointed out in my intervention—

Alan Brown: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs May: Just wait a second—or perhaps more than one second. As I pointed out in my intervention on the right hon. Leader of the Opposition, and as was emphasised by the excellent intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), in 13 years of Government, whatever the then leader of the Labour party might have said, they did not build any new nuclear capability.

Alan Brown: Hinkley Point C will be at least four years late, possibly five. It is nearly 50% over budget and EDF has an eye-watering 35-year contract for a strike rate at £92.50 per MW, compared with roughly £40 per MW for just 15 years in onshore and offshore wind. The right hon. Lady should have scrapped Hinkley Point C when she had the chance, should she not?

Mrs May: It is high time that Scottish nationalists came up with some practical solutions to these issues, rather than rejecting everything the Government suggests.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We are all trying to find energy security, so I say to the former Prime Minister and to the Government Front Bench that we should be prioritising tidal. There is an excellent Royal Society report from last year that indicates that we can get 11.5 GW. I ask the Government to enhance the ringfenced pot from £20 million to £50 million; they will get the baseload they need, and they will not need nuclear energy.

Mrs May: This is rather strange point in my political career, because I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on the importance of tidal. When I was Prime Minister I looked very closely, over a significant period of time, at proposals for the Severn estuary in particular. Unfortunately, at that time the price that would have had to be guaranteed in relation to the cost to the consumer was too high. Of course, looking at it today, it could be a very different picture.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister outlined a number of steps the Government are taking, and I look forward to seeing the full details of those. However, I suggest there are some other measures that would both address energy prices and energy security while capitalising on our high-growth tech sectors, and help us to meet our domestic and international climate change obligations. There are measures that will save people money that will also help to save the planet.

The UK has already shown that we do not have to choose between low emissions and economic growth. We can have both. To achieve net zero we will need to remove the country’s dependence on fossil fuels. My right hon. Friend announced a net zero review; perhaps when he sums up this debate the Secretary of State could indicate how that net zero review will fit in with the net zero strategy that the Government published in advance of COP26, and which many are already working on.

While my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has acted swiftly and correctly to help people over these difficult times, it makes sense to accelerate our transition to a low-carbon energy system. That can be done by speeding up the roll-out of low-cost, home-grown renewable technologies.

Kevin Brennan: The former Prime Minister says that the Government have acted correctly, but the Government's case is that energy prices are going up because of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, those profits are being earned because of the war in Ukraine. Why is it right to prioritise war profiteering and instead have a stealth tax on households?

Mrs May: What is right is to provide support for households who are worried about their energy bills, and that is exactly what the Government are doing.

Of course, if we are going to increase our use of renewables, it is important that the price people pay for their electricity reflects the cost of that production and not the cost of gas. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend—

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) *rose—*

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) *rose—*

Mrs May: I am going to make some progress. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has indicated that she will take action in relation to that particular matter, but getting full benefit from that does mean upgrading the UK's power grid infrastructure. Alongside that, we need to improve the energy efficiency of homes, which would not only reduce demand for energy, saving people money, but is an element that would help to save the planet. We need to consider rolling out a significant home insulation programme.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Mrs May: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), and then to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Richard Graham: My right hon. Friend's Government did indeed look very closely at the prospect of a tidal lagoon off Swansea bay. It is quite correct, as she says, that at the time it was too expensive—although the price now looks relatively attractive. Does she agree that the real opportunity now, which the current Chancellor was very supportive of when he was at BEIS, is for marine energy to come from tidal stream? The new renewable auction is supporting that, but there is much more that can be done, especially if we can affect the planning regulations around the pipeline of opportunity. Does she agree that there is more this Government could do on that?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I welcome every opportunity to increase the diversity of our supply of energy, and looking at these new opportunities is absolutely a way to do that.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. I completely support the tidal lagoon in Swansea and hope that is now a real possibility for us—I hope the Prime Minister would accept that—and

I agree with the right hon. Lady about insulation. I think I understood the Prime Minister to say earlier that there would be protection for public services for just six months. Many local authorities, hospitals and schools are facing dramatically increased bills already. Are they not going to need more support than just six months?

Mrs May: I think the public sector will be very pleased to hear that the Government have taken their concerns on board and are providing support for them.

There is another step that the Government need to take: they should look at building regulations. We are still building homes with gas boilers. Does it not make sense to change the regulations? Those gas homes will have to be retrofitted in just a few years' time, so surely it is more cost-effective to take action now.

Alberto Costa: I am very—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had one intervention. What I am bothered about is that there are a lot of people who want to get in. I do not want to stifle the debate, but I do want to make sure that everybody gets a voice.

Mrs May: I apologise, Mr Speaker, for being generous in taking interventions.

The Government are also key to driving greater private sector investment in low-carbon solutions, for instance by de-risking investment in early-stage technologies—we have already heard about some early-stage technologies—and emerging sectors such as hydrogen production. Greater investor certainty cuts the cost of new technology, drives innovation, creates jobs and boosts economic growth. The Government's unequivocal support for this agenda would be a positive signal not just for our green tech industry, but for the ambition of the UK economy more broadly.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) *rose—*

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) *rose—*

Mrs May: I am just about to finish.

People need help with their bills today, and that is what the Government are providing. But Britain led the world through the industrial revolution. If we grasp the opportunity now, we can lead the world in a cleaner, greener form of growth.

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

12.31 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). If I may briefly reflect back on the way she behaved when she was Prime Minister, I have to say that she showed courtesy to Opposition leaders, whether it was the then leader of the Labour party or ourselves as the third party. If I may gently say so to the Prime Minister, some of the protocols to make sure that we have advance sight of statements, and indeed are aware of when the

[*Ian Blackford*]

Prime Minister will be coming to the Chamber to speak, are important—I do not know whether she was listening to any of that, but it would be helpful if it could be passed on.

At the start of the year we were faced with an energy crisis. By the summer it was an emergency. Right now, today, we are at the precipice of a humanitarian disaster, because it is no longer a question of whether to heat or eat when many households can no longer afford to do either.

Patricia Gibson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ian Blackford: Let me make some progress and then I will.

This cost crisis puts livelihoods and lives at risk. All the while, as this disaster deepened, all summer the Tories spent all their time desperately fighting among themselves, and the public were left desperately waiting for a real cost of living plan. We finally—finally—have a plan today, but I fear that when the public absorb the details, it will fall far short of the help we need.

We have heard today that the green levies are being scrapped. That is of deep concern to those of us on these Benches, particularly given that the green levies fund the warm home discount scheme and, of course, energy-efficiency measures for low-income households. I ask the Government to make sure that that support will remain in place for those who need it. But the sheer scale of the soaring energy bills meant that there was never any question but that households and businesses would not be able to pay the cost of energy bills. They were, and they are, unaffordable. If these prices were not frozen, the bills simply could not have been paid, so freezing prices was not really a choice. It is the only political option.

When the current price cap stands at £2,000, with a 54% increase since spring, and when many people are already unable to pay, setting the cap at £2,500 is not an actual freeze. We know, too, that businesses, especially SMEs, are facing even sharper cost increases than households, and an avalanche of insolvencies and redundancies is forecast. Many businesses simply could not have afforded to stay open.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Reids bakery in my constituency, which supplies biscuits to the four corners of the world, is in danger of going bust by Christmas. May I appeal to the Government, in a spirit of inclusivity, to please look at the letter that I have been sent by Reids bakery and see what could be tailored to help a vital business in a remote part of the UK?

Ian Blackford: I agree with my hon. Friend and neighbouring MP. Indeed, over the course of the last few weeks I have visited businesses in Ayrshire with my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). We visited another bakery, Brownings, and met with the industry body. It is clear that bakers in particular are facing real struggles with the rise of energy and other costs. It is critical that the Government give the details of what they are intending in order to support businesses.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) *rose*—

Ian Blackford: I will take one more intervention.

Steve McCabe: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. On the question of the cap, the Prime Minister indicated that one of her reviews will be of regulation. Does the right hon. Gentleman think it is time to take a serious look at the operations of Ofgem and how much support it is giving as a regulator to consumers, whether domestic consumers or businesses?

Ian Blackford: I think it is fair to say that the current regime is not fit for purpose, which is why we are in this situation today, so an urgent review of that is absolutely required.

Let me make some progress. Good, profitable businesses seeing a tsunami of cost increases, with energy costs at its core, are quite simply facing a fight for survival. It is clear that today's plan does not go nearly far enough to mitigate the expected cost increase facing employers. The UK Government need to grasp the scale of this emergency.

Mr Speaker: Order. I wish to say something about the announcement that has just been made about Her Majesty. I know that I speak on behalf of the entire House when I say that we send our best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen, and that she and the royal family are in our thoughts and prayers at this moment. I am not going to take any contributions on this now; if there is anything else, we will update the House accordingly.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me say, I am sure on behalf of all colleagues, that we are saddened to hear the announcement that has been made. The thoughts and prayers of us all will be with Her Majesty the Queen and indeed with the royal family.

In reality, the one big political question—the real question—was how today's plan would be paid for and who would pay for it. Ever since the new Prime Minister took office, we have been waiting for these answers, but after all the waiting it could not be any clearer. She set it out very brazenly: the Prime Minister's plan means that the public pay. She has made the political choice to tax families instead of companies—to put profit over people. Instead of a windfall tax, she has chosen a new Tory tax: the Truss tax—the Truss tax that means that, in the months and years ahead, households and businesses will be punished with higher bills, higher interest rates and higher mortgage costs. A Truss tax means cuts to the vital public services that people rely on and that are used to support the most vulnerable. A Truss tax means a threat to the Scottish budget, which the Scottish Government are using to protect our population and shield workers and public services as best they can.

Jacob Young: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He seems to be making an argument for a windfall tax on the oil and gas companies. They already pay 65% on their profits. Given that the Leader of the Opposition was not able to answer this question, what would he rather see that tax set at?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for that intervention. If the hon. Member just bears with me, I will come to that specific point, but the issue of who pays is important, because there is no—[*Interruption.*] Well, actually I

will do, and the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) might actually show some respect, if he does not mind. At the end of the day, oil and gas producers are making windfall profits. Our constituents, and his constituents, are suffering. It is right that we look at the contribution that those making windfall profits will make, and I will come to that.

Barry Gardiner *rose—*

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) *rose—*

Ian Blackford: I am going to make a little progress, because I am conscious that others want to get in.

The frightening thing is that the new Prime Minister made that choice on day one in the job. On day one, we saw the pound slip to a low not seen since the Thatcher years, knocked by the UK's worsening economic outlook. Her first major decision as Prime Minister will prioritise big business profits over family budgets, and we can already predict that the Truss tax, which will be paid for by households for years to come, will be her enduring legacy. It will eat away at household budgets long after she and her party have been voted out of office. If day one was that bad, we cannot blame people for fearing that the worst is yet to come.

The decision not to bring in an additional windfall tax is the biggest and worst political choice in the plan. Let us look at Shell and BP as an example. I want corporates to be profitable and to be able to invest to create jobs and to finance a green transition, but there is a difference between a fair profit and an excess windfall or excess profit. Shell's first half profits were up by 177% to \$25.2 billion. It made excess profits to such an extent that it bought back shares worth \$8.5 billion and declared that it would buy back a further \$6 billion of shares between July and September. If we want an example of where excess profit is, it is there. In total, that means that \$14.5 billion of excess profits will not be invested in green energy projects—money that has been generated from the high energy prices that our constituents and our businesses have to pay. That is the reality.

BP's quarter 2 profits were up from \$3.1 billion to \$9.2 billion, and there is a share buyback for this quarter of \$3.5 billion. It will frankly disgust our constituents that that money is being given back to shareholders when people simply cannot afford to put their heating on. They are global corporates, but we can and should fairly tax their UK activities, so why on earth is the Prime Minister failing to bring in a fair windfall tax? Why will ordinary people across these islands ultimately have to foot these bills? Why does her plan not address that real issue?

This energy plan is defined not only by the choice to make the public pay, instead of the excess profits of massive corporations, but by its glaring omissions. There is no proper plan to help those who are already struggling. Support needs to be targeted to low-income households and those negatively affected by spiralling costs, such as unpaid carers, larger households and disabled people.

In Scotland, we are already prioritising support to the most vulnerable. The Scottish Government are doing what they can by freezing rents, banning evictions,

freezing train fares and expanding free school meals to primary 6 and primary 7. That is a Government acting with compassion.

Chris Law: I thank my right hon. Friend for making the most valid point that for generations to come, working people across these islands will be paying for this borrowing for excess greed. The UN Secretary General has described it as utterly “grotesque” and “immoral” to be making excess profits on the back of fossil fuels. What I have heard from the Government is more of the same. My question is whether the Government have, despite their ideology that profits must be made regardless, put any conditions on those excess profits and on what those companies will do to invest in a rapid transition to save future generations from the climate catastrophe.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In that context, we are doing what we can with the devolved powers that we have.

I say to the Government that one thing we have done is to introduce the game-changing Scottish child payment, which will increase to £25 a week and lift 50,000 children in Scotland out of poverty.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Ian Blackford: I need to make progress.

We are all too aware, however, that that is nowhere near enough to mitigate the effects of the crisis, because most of the key economic levers lie here in Westminster. If the new Prime Minister is serious about helping everyone through the winter, she should at least lift universal credit by £25 a week. Although I welcome her remarks about those who are off grid, we must be given clarity about support for those across swathes of rural Scotland who rely on oil heating and are not subject to the price cap.

Clarity is also needed for those who have accepted fixed-term contracts at a higher rate in a bid to weather the storm. They must be allowed to switch to benefit from the support that has been put in place. Crucially, vital support for the most vulnerable must go hand in hand with the UK Government increasing the budgets of the devolved Administrations, or granting them greater powers to borrow, so that they can do more to help all public service workers and the most vulnerable.

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is making a broad and apposite speech. He was challenged on the rate of tax that he believes is appropriate, but he will know that prior to the introduction of the windfall tax, the UK had the lowest tax rate of any oil and gas producer in the world. He was challenged on 65%, which is actually 6% below the average of all producers in the world. If he were prepared to go to the global average, it would still mean that relief could be given to taxpayers in this country.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman's intervention makes an awful lot of sense. We should reflect on the fact that oil and gas companies are making additional profits not because they are improving their businesses or investing, but simply because oil and gas prices are higher. It is right in that context that our consumers and

[*Ian Blackford*]

businesses are compensated. Why on earth are we sitting back and allowing the oil and gas companies to engage in billions and billions of dollars of share buybacks?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Blackford: I will make progress, because I am conscious of time and those who want to speak.

I will briefly deal with another prominent point in the Prime Minister's speech. She blames the cost of living crisis on the war in Ukraine and I believe that that is worth expanding on. Of course, there is no doubt that what has happened in Ukraine has played a major role in spiralling wholesale prices, and we have rightly come together across the Chamber in condemnation of Putin's horrific war and his actions to thwart European energy supplies. I look forward to continuing to work with the new Government in a spirit of consensus on this issue. We all stand together against Putin's horrible actions and the war in Ukraine.

As we have rightly helped Ukraine, however, we must also help citizens at home. Indeed, we owe it to them to do so; I hope that the Prime Minister will reach consensus with me on that point. Where we divide is my belief that we must recognise that other countries in Europe, which are far more reliant on Russian gas than the UK, have weathered the economic storm far better than the United Kingdom. We must therefore recognise the UK Government's role in creating the circumstances for the crisis. Shameful mismanagement by successive Tory Governments, topped by a Tory Brexit, means that the UK has the highest inflation in the G7 and the lowest growth in the G20, and that we are marching headlong into a recession. UK household electricity prices have surged ahead of those of our European peers, and the UK is now in a deeper state of crisis than most, because of the damaging choices that have been made.

Patricia Gibson: For my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, who live in difficulty, the most important aspect of today's announcement is that they were waiting to hear of help with their fuel bills, but they were instead told that their fuel bills will rise. They will be bitterly disappointed by that. Nothing has been offered to them today. Does my right hon. Friend agree with their disappointment?

Ian Blackford: Yes, I do. We need to reflect that energy bills are rising in an energy-rich Scotland. The damage done by the UK Government's choices—choices that have been imposed on us—make the choice about Scotland's future ever clearer. Scotland is energy rich, so we simply should not be facing an energy emergency. It may surprise some in this House, but Scotland produces six times more gas than we consume and almost 100% of our entire electricity production comes from renewables. That is not attention-seeking, I would say to the Prime Minister; these are the facts. Scotland has the energy, but we just simply do not have the powers. We are stuck in a UK market that prices our electricity on the basis of the price of wholesale gas, and the power to change the system lies with Westminster.

Carol Monaghan: My right hon. Friend will also know that, although we are producing almost 100% of our energy from renewable sources, the grid connection

charge—£7.36 per megawatt-hour compared with 40p per megawatt-hour in England—does not help further investment. We need these grid connection charges to be reduced, because my constituents want to know, when they can see wind turbines outside their windows, why their prices are going up.

Ian Blackford: Again, my hon. Friend makes a very important point. We are being ripped off on Scotland's ability to deliver green renewable energy, but it is even worse than that. For those of us who live in the north of Scotland, because we have a regional distribution market, we pay a premium for the electricity that is sent south and then have to pay the highest prices to get it back. That is the cost to people in Scotland of Westminster's control of our energy market.

What is needed—this is most crucial of all, and it is glaringly lacking in this energy plan—is a fundamental overhaul of the energy market to break the link between the cost of gas and the price of renewable and low-carbon electricity. The reality is that an independent and energy-rich Scotland with the normal powers to act in our own interests could have cushioned our economy from this cost of living crisis. Through independence, Scotland could use our energy well for the benefit of our people, so for households and businesses in Scotland the cost of living crisis is literally the cost of living with Westminster. It is a cost we can no longer afford and it is a price we are no longer willing to pay. It is why Scotland's people will choose independence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There is a lot of interest in this debate, so we are introducing forthwith a three-minute time limit.

12.52 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister and indeed all her colleagues to their places on the Front Bench, and the rapid action that has been announced today. I wanted to see action for consumers in my constituency, but also for businesses, charities and the public sector, and I am delighted to hear all of that included in today's statement. Over the summer, I have heard from hundreds of constituents about their concerns—people who are vulnerable, the elderly, students and people with illnesses and disabilities—about how they will not be able to turn down their heating in the upcoming winter. The action that has been announced today will be extremely welcome in all of those quarters, and the fact that there is a two-year cap in place is particularly welcome in my constituency.

I have also been hearing from businesses, and I have been very concerned about some of the costs facing pubs, hospitality businesses and manufacturers in my constituency. Indeed, as long ago as last year, I wrote to the then Business Secretary—now the Chancellor—about high-energy manufacturers such as aluminium extrusion businesses Superform and Aeromet in my constituency and about some of our largest manufacturers such as Worcester Bosch and Mazak in relation to the impact of energy costs on them, so I am delighted that today's announcement also means help for businesses with energy. Of course, that help for businesses with energy is also, in the long term, help for consumers.

I look forward to hearing more about the urgent work going on to support the hospitality sector, which is so important in all our constituencies, and even retailers have been affected by these issues. Toys & Games of Worcester, a wonderful independent retailer in my constituency, expects its energy bills to go up by as much as 400% later this year. Following today's intervention, I hope that will no longer happen and that that business can continue to thrive.

As a former schools Minister, I am delighted to hear of the help for schools. It is vital that we help them to address the challenges they face with energy pressures. On that front, the intervention is important, as it is for charities. In the last week I have visited my wonderful hospice in Worcester, St Richard's, and this week I will be visiting the children's hospice, which were both concerned about the impact of energy bills. We have seen correct interventions in all those spaces.

There is much to welcome in this statement: the new energy supply taskforce; speeding up the deployment of clean technologies, including, crucially, hydrogen; the reduction in inflation by up to five percentage points, and the new Bank of England scheme to support liquidity in the wholesale market; and the review to ensure that net zero can be met in a way that supports business and is pro-growth, which I am delighted to hear is taking place under my right hon. Friend—and sometime lookalike—the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). I welcome the statement, and I want to make sure that we go further. In particular, I urge Ministers to consider the opportunities provided by hydrogen in helping to ensure that gas central heating continues to be delivered to our constituents' homes in a clean, low-cost and energy-efficient way.

12.55 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Although the solutions to this crisis may sound complicated in this debate, the choice is straightforward for the Government: who pays at the end of the day? Let us be clear what a windfall tax is. It does not tax profits that energy companies had planned for and could have expected in all reason. This windfall has come about, as the Government have said themselves, as a consequence of what is happening in Ukraine and the aggression by Putin. The question that I have and my constituents will have is: how can the Government reasonably come to a conclusion that it is okay for those energy companies to make these huge profits on the back of that aggression by Putin?

No matter what we do over the windfall tax, there will be a cost to the taxpayer because the Government are under pressure in other areas of expenditure. We only have to look at the newspapers today to see how, yet again, the number of people waiting for operations in the NHS has gone up to 6.8 million; and how the cost of living is forcing teaching assistants to question whether they can commit themselves to supporting children in schools or should move to higher-paid jobs, such as in supermarkets. Everywhere we look, the Government are under pressure over public expenditure on our vital public services. Yet they are prepared to wave aside the potential to pay for these increases through a windfall tax.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful that my hon. Friend mentions teaching assistants because one contacted me recently. Many low-paid workers and

others on moderate incomes be staggered by the Government's decision to put the interests of energy companies ahead of those of normal families.

Clive Efford: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are morally wrong to turn their back on a windfall tax when they are clearly under financial pressure in other areas of public expenditure.

In my brief contribution, I want to raise one specific issue relating to my constituency. I have a craft bakery that has survived for 100 years and is about to celebrate its centenary. It has been run by six generations of the same family. It kept feeding people in my constituency—I was not the MP at the time, I hasten to add—during the second world war, so even the Luftwaffe could not shut down this bakery. It employs 20 members of staff, in an industry where energy use is really heavy, and faces cost increases of 300% or 400%, so it is trying to renegotiate its energy contracts. As the statement published by the Government says—I have it here; on such an important crisis, its sheer length is 200 words—there will be assistance for businesses equivalent to that given to individuals, guaranteed “for six months”. The Prime Minister said—I wrote these words down—that businesses would be given some idea of what assistance they will get “within three months”, but they are negotiating now. We had no clarity from the Prime Minister in her statement. It was as though she was making a Queen's Speech—“My Government will”—but she gave us no detail on what Ministers will be doing.

One thing I want a guarantee on is that, if we are to get a financial statement from the Government next week or before the conference recess, we will have a proper debate in this Chamber, as we are required to have. Or will the Government avoid scrutiny—as has been a repeated action—yet again?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

12.59 pm

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I rise broadly to welcome these measures. We know that we live in terribly difficult times. Yesterday the Treasury Committee took evidence from the Governor of the Bank of England and other members of the Monetary Policy Committee, and the point was made that the impact of the energy price rises on households is about four times that which occurred in the 1970s. These are truly frightening times, and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has come forward with such a bold package of measures for consumers and, critically, for businesses over the next six months, with a review after three months. I was pleased to see the Bank of England liquidity facility for energy businesses totalling £40 billion, which I think will be important for the functioning of the marketplace, as well as the critical commitment to review the way that the pricing of our electricity is determined, whether in relation to gas or to the underlying costs of alternative means of energy production.

I also want to focus briefly on the macroeconomic issues, which are easy to overlook. This is a huge intervention. The Prime Minister detailed that the Chancellor will come forward with costings at the emergency fiscal event that he is soon to present to the House. Alongside the tax reductions that have been mooted, plus other pressures on the public finance, it means that debt will almost certainly increase, as will the deficit. It

[*Mel Stride*]

has been stated that inflation will be assisted by these measures—that is true; inflation is just a measure of price rises relative to a previous period at a particular point in time. Although downward pressure on the consumer prices index from these freezes will be positive, it will be a stimulus to the economy and, through time, net inflation may increase. That will require a response from our central Bank, which might see interest rates increase in the more medium term, with increased servicing costs for our debt. We must see this very much in the round, and that is where the debate on the windfall tax should at least be considered. The Treasury Committee will be looking at that in some detail.

My final point, in my remaining 30 seconds, is that when it comes to the emergency fiscal event, it is critical that we have an Office for Budget Responsibility independent forecast to take into account all those issues—the great uncertainty we are talking about, and the huge fiscal interventions for which the costings have not yet been presented to us. We must see what the impact of that will be on the public finances in order to reassure the markets.

1.2 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Everyone will be affected by the rise in energy prices and will be looking for ways to cut back by being more careful with the appliances they use, or opting for alternative ways to keep warm and prepare meals. It is a worrying time for many of my constituents and for others the length and breadth of the country.

For some, however, the worry and fear is even greater. More than 60,000 people across the UK are in need of renal replacement therapy in the form of dialysis or a transplant. My daughter-in-law, Hayleigh, is one of those. Hayleigh suffers from kidney failure, and has done since she was 11. A transplant at 15 gave her seven years of freedom, but for the past 11 years she has been back on dialysis. Home dialysis allows Hayleigh to spend more time with her family, and has even given her the opportunity to attend university, and go to work rather than spending three days a week in hospital. However, running the machine for 10 hours at a time, six nights a week, comes at a price. The approximate cost for electricity to run the home dialysis machine is currently almost £80 per month, and with energy prices set to soar, those costs will only increase, threatening the ability of many patients to continue their life-saving treatment at home.

The charities Kidney Care UK and Popham Kidney Support in my constituency have recently contacted me about their concerns for patients, and the lack of support they are being offered by energy providers. In Wales, patients like Hayleigh are reimbursed by the Welsh Renal Clinic Network, but with the cost of extra energy needed for home dialysis machines expected to increase to £2,000 a year, the level of financial support will fall far short. The situation is even worse in other parts of the country, where reimbursement amounts vary considerably, with some patients receiving no help at all.

The cost of kidney failure and other chronic conditions should not be borne by patients. It is not only dialysis patients who are affected. Many people depend on

home electrical medical equipment—oxygen concentrators, nebulisers, artificial ventilators, stairlifts, or bed and bath hoists. Add to that the additional costs for heating and lighting, and many vulnerable people will be feeling the pain of this winter. No one should be in a position where they have to cut back their use of vital equipment for fear of paying their bills. For my daughter-in-law, and for all the Hayleighs out there who are looking at uncomfortable and unaffordable increases to their bills, will the Government ensure that sufficient financial support is made available to cover that essential electrical medical equipment?

1.5 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will keep the scope of my comments brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, given the time available. The written statement included confirmation—the Prime Minister also confirmed this—that the Chancellor will set out the expected costs as part of the fiscal statement. Will those costs include the Government's assumptions for how wholesale prices will move over the coming months and years? Yes, it is an estimate, but we have to make assumptions to calculate the cost. Secondly, and importantly, will the estimates of the cost of that package be independently scored by the Office for Budget Responsibility, or will they simply be the Government's assessment of costs? It would be helpful if the Minister could confirm which of those it will be when he responds to the debate.

I welcome wholeheartedly confirmation from the Prime Minister that people who are off the gas grid will be protected by this announcement. A full 40% of my constituents are off the gas grid, and I believe the number is broadly similar in the Prime Minister's constituency. It is great to have confirmation that they will be helped, but a bit more detail on process is important. People who buy oil or liquefied petroleum gas tend to buy it in lumps—they have to fill a tank. If they were to place an order today, for example, to ensure they have sufficient energy, they will need to know whether the costs of that order will be covered by the price guarantee, or whether that will be only for deliveries that take place after 1 October. Although the details may need to be worked through, confirmation about that is incredibly important. It would be terrible if someone on a low income made a very expensive purchase today, and then discovered that they had inadvertently cut themselves out of help. Equally, we do not want people running out of energy by delaying those purchases.

My final point is to flesh out what I said in my intervention on the Leader of the Opposition. My understanding is that over half of the £170 billion excess profit includes profits made by foreign companies on energy supplied to the United Kingdom. It is not within the scope of the Exchequer to tax that. Secondly, we already have a windfall tax. We are already taxing excess profits at a total rate of 65%. That windfall tax has been legislated for by this House, and it will stretch forward to December 2025. I do not really know what the Labour party is arguing for, and I noticed that after my intervention, the Leader of the Opposition would not say what rate he thought a windfall tax should raise—65% seems quite high to me, and it would be helpful if Labour could confirm what it believes it should be.

1.8 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Following the earlier statement from Mr Speaker, I think our hearts, thoughts and prayers will be elsewhere, but I wanted to contribute to the debate and to agree with the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and his questions on heating oil. That is a critical issue for people in rural communities, and we need answers immediately.

What the Prime Minister has announced is not a freeze on people's energy bills. In the middle of a cost of living emergency, the Conservatives are choosing to put energy bills up by another £500 for struggling families. That hike in people's energy bills comes on top of the £700 rise we saw last April. Struggling families will be paying twice as much for energy as they were last year, and people will still be desperately worried about how they will keep warm this winter. Last May's £400 discount will simply not make up for the enormous rise in energy bills. So where is the new support for families and pensioners who are struggling? Under the Prime Minister's plan, fuel poverty will get worse, not better.

I turn to how we think the Prime Minister is proposing to pay for the package. Why does it seem that the Government will be handing an eye-watering bill to taxpayers in the form of higher borrowing? We all know that that ultimately means higher taxes for taxpayers, and particularly for our children. That does not seem conservative, and it does not seem right. Why has she rejected the alternative of a windfall tax on today's oil and gas giants, who are raking in enormous, unexpectedly high profits thanks to President Putin's invasion of Ukraine? How is it fair to take money from future taxpayers—from our children—and hand it to today's oil and gas barons? How is it responsible to borrow so much to pay for consumption when our economy is already in such a mess, with the pound falling so dangerously?

The fair and responsible energy policy would be to increase investment massively in the cheapest and most popular forms of energy available to us: wind and solar. I was absolutely shocked that the Prime Minister did not announce a massive, fast expansion of renewables to bring people's energy bills down.

The Prime Minister has made some alarming choices today by rejecting cheap wind and solar power, raising energy bills even higher than they are now, refusing to give extra support to struggling families and pensioners, and paying for a policy with higher taxes on our children instead of a windfall tax on fossil fuels. Those are the wrong choices.

1.11 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I start by saying: may God bless our Queen. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

I sincerely welcome the announcement—it is fantastic that we have seized the massive problem that is facing us—which will give relief to so many households and businesses who have been terrified by the prospect of what was to come. I am convinced that that reassurance will be greatly pleasing to them.

I want to take a couple of minutes to talk about some really low-hanging fruit that I do not think we have made enough of yet. With energy prices where they are,

we as a Government could do a lot more. We could, for example, go house to house—through energy suppliers; not as Government officials—to assist people with looking at how they can reduce their energy bills. There are many practical ways and great ideas for doing that, not least of which are turning down boiler thermostats—people should not do that themselves at home—to make more effective use of energy and turning down the hot water tap pressure. Those things are really low-hanging fruit that could be done tomorrow, and forecasters suggest that they could save up to 10% off energy bills.

Most important of all is insulation. Current energy prices are a game-changer for insulation. Recent research suggests that £1,000 could pay for basic cavity wall or loft insulation for the average household and that the sector could insulate up to half a million homes this winter and 1 million homes next year. That could be cost-neutral to the Treasury as it would not be paying the excess for the price cap. With energy prices at current levels, it is worth looking again at massively ramping up household insulation.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way because there is so little time.

Finally, as Business Secretary and then as chair of the 1922 Backbench committee on business, energy and industrial strategy, so many businesses have said to me, "We cannot get a grid connection for our solar panels, so there is no point in doing it." I would say to them that, with energy prices where they are, they could get themselves a battery and have some internal energy independence. Many businesses should be looking at that. The Government's role should be to provide advice through the energy suppliers.

1.14 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) with regard to dialysis patients. My late mum was on dialysis due to her sickle cell—she dialysed three times a week—and one reason why she did not want to switch to home dialysis was its cost. Many sickle cell and dialysis patients who will need to have their heating on this winter will be worrying so much about how they will pay their bills.

On what the Prime Minister announced this morning, without the right action from this Government, the next few years will be fraught with so many difficulties for my constituents in Vauxhall. The decisions that the Government have made today will impact them for many years to come. I hope that the Prime Minister and the new Government will have that in mind as they make decisions about the next few years.

Solving the energy crisis is the first test of the new Government. Will they make the big decisions on the oil and gas firms who are making record profits while people up and down the country continue to suffer? Will they be fiscally responsible and do everything in their power to lower the burden on future generations? Will they support families who are already making desperate choices between putting food on the table and heating their home? I am afraid to say that, on the basis

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

of the Prime Minister's announcement and what we have heard from the Government, the answer is a resounding no.

For many of my constituents, the cost of living crisis did not start when Ofcom raised the price cap last month. For many, it did not even start when Russia invaded Ukraine earlier this year. The squeeze in their wages, which have not been keeping up with prices, has been a feature of the Government over the last few years. Households have been squeezed relentlessly over decades. Statistics from the Trussell Trust show that, between April 2019 and March 2020, more than 20,000 food parcels were distributed in Lambeth. The shock of the energy crisis has been severe, but we cannot keep ignoring the fact that a number of households have been left in this position as their bills continue to go sky-high.

We cannot ignore the failure to insulate homes due to failed insulation policies and the end of the Warm Front discount introduced by the Labour Government. What do we get from this Government? We get the rulebook on fracking ripped up while people continue to see untapped onshore wind potential. We get attacks on workers' rights, with people taking to losing a day's pay—more in some cases—to fight for wage increases and their rights. We see scraps of policy on insulating homes as our homes continue to bleed the energy that they need. That bears the hallmark of the incompetence of the last 12 years of this Conservative Government.

We cannot afford to go on like this. Enough is enough. We need a sea change with the Government recognising the issues faced by people in Vauxhall and up and down the country. We need a sea change, and we need a new Government.

1.17 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, which set out two broad areas. First, we have the immediate support that she will give to so many people around the country as well as to businesses. Like many hon. Members—perhaps all hon. Members—I have had many constituents getting in touch to say how concerned they are about the cost of energy now and how fearful they are about the cost of energy this coming winter. The decisive action that she has taken is therefore incredibly welcome.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the Prime Minister's longer-term vision. Much of the current problem is caused by the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin and the Russian army. However, we can also look back to the oil crisis of the 1970s and see that if we are dependent on foreign sources of energy for heating our homes and powering our industry, we will always be in a vulnerable place. I therefore welcome her ambition for the United Kingdom to be a net exporter of energy by 2040. That is a hugely positive ambition for the United Kingdom, for our industry and for the sector.

I would like to emphasise that nuclear needs to form a key part of the United Kingdom's energy sector. It is reliable baseload energy that we can depend on come rain or shine. In the north-west of England, right across the three counties of Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria, there is huge talent in the sector, and by investing in that and giving the sector more security, we will protect and secure those jobs. I think also of the Springfields nuclear

fuels plant near Preston. We need security for that plant to ensure that it can maintain itself and maintain its staff, the skilled engineers and skilled apprentices, on that site. We need to secure that site and many other places in the north-west of England. Warrington and the wider area also has an enormous wealth of talent.

Mike Amesbury: Does the hon. Member share my concern about one of the announcements, on fracking? I am quite confident that my community will not accept it. I know the hon. Member's constituency of Bolton West and the beautiful rural idylls surrounding it. Does he feel that it will accept it?

Chris Green: The Prime Minister is committed to respecting the views and values of local communities, and I support that. However, in the short time I have in which to contribute I am trying to focus on nuclear energy.

We want that commitment in the north-west but also in Hinkley Point C, which is a phenomenal site and a phenomenal investment in our United Kingdom. I want our commitment to nuclear energy and the phenomenal workforce at the Hinkley Point C site in Somerset to go on to the next nuclear project and a whole series of nuclear projects, whether full-scale nuclear reactors or small modular reactors. There is huge potential and ambition, which the Prime Minister will set out and the Business Secretary will give more detail on. That is immensely positive for so many different parts of our country. I also particularly welcome the location of Rolls-Royce SMR headquarters in the city of Manchester.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before we move on, I say to Members that there is absolutely no problem with there being interventions. However, I would advise sticking to the three minutes, because not everybody is necessarily going to get in. Interventions mean that the speaker gets an extra minute, and that means an extra minute off somebody else. Please do take interventions, but I would really appreciate it if colleagues then stuck to the three minutes.

1.21 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I echo the best wishes to Her Majesty.

The new Prime Minister takes up her role at a moment when the country is facing a series of multiple crises of staggering proportions, including a likely recession and, let us not forget, the accelerating climate emergency, which, in the words of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, means that there is

“a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future.”

This moment, therefore, required bold, visionary thinking grounded in compassion, not cold and outdated economic dogma. It called for a retrofit revolution, a massive investment in home insulation and renewable energy upgrades that could finally deliver warm homes and lower bills. I was staggered that the Prime Minister did not mention once the demand-side measures that need to be put into the communities around our country, so that people can finally have lower bills and warmer homes.

What this moment did not call for were measures that would lock us into further dependence on fossil fuels. While Putin's war in Ukraine has accelerated the crisis, fundamentally it is one caused by our dependence on gas, and it will not be solved by extracting more gas. It certainly will not be solved by a resumption of fracking, which would be a disaster for the climate and a measure which, as her own Chancellor admitted barely six months ago, would do nothing to lower energy bills and would fail to produce enough gas to meet even 1% of our needs for more than the next three years.

Coming on to the detail of the Prime Minister's support package, I welcome the fact that she has finally acted on a price freeze, but the measures are nowhere near enough. They are poorly targeted, and without a substantial package of additional support they will fail to support millions of low-income families who are already in freefall. They cannot cope with current prices, never mind an increase. That is why my party would return the price cap to its more affordable rate of last October. The measures do nothing to incentivise a reduction in energy demand by those who can do that. Most staggering of all, as we have heard about so much, they allow the oil and gas companies to get off scot-free, despite the Treasury's own documents showing that energy producers are in line to make £170 billion in excess profits over the next two years.

What we need to do is scrap the shameful investment allowance, put in a windfall tax that is proportionate to the crisis we face and make that the first step towards a permanent carbon tax on oil and gas companies to reach, at the very least, the global average of 70%. That would bring the UK in line with countries such as Angola and Trinidad.

I welcome the fact that the Government have been consulting on decoupling the price of renewables from gas—that would be a game-changing step—but I also want to ask the Prime Minister to make a massive investment in renewable energy. Renewables are a staggering nine times cheaper than gas. There are 650 wind and solar projects oven-ready and waiting. That is the way forward, not putting us into more and more fossil fuels. Finally, will the Government look at measures such as a rising block tariff approach, which would be much fairer in the future?

1.24 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): While the thoughts of the House are first and foremost with Her Majesty the Queen this afternoon, it is important that we take the opportunity to debate these challenges today.

I welcome the speed with which the Government have moved to bring forward a very strong package of measures that have been announced today. I welcome the substance of the package. It provides a very strong platform to help get families through this immediate price crisis. For me, it meets the test of scale, it meets the test of timeliness and it provides certainty for those families who, frankly, have been living in a state of anxiety thinking about the enormous bills coming their way. I welcome the assurance from the Prime Minister today that the package will cover everybody and that there will not be gaps. It will cover the more than 50% of households in my constituency that have homes off the

gas grid and rely on heating oil and liquified petroleum gas. I also want to ensure that people who live in park homes can access the support they need and that there are no gaps.

I still think we will need to take further measures to strengthen some of the social protection for those on the very lowest incomes, despite the measures that have been announced today. I think there are some easy wins for the Government on freezing or limiting the deductions we take from people's social security payments. We should look again at the benefit cap and, most importantly, it would be good for the new Administration to reiterate the commitment of the previous Government to a full social security uprating in the new year.

It is important that the measures also cover businesses. I have heard from so many small businesses in my constituency during the summer, particularly food manufacturers, breweries, and hospitality and tourism businesses. For them, this is an existential issue. These are good businesses, but if prices go the way that are being predicted, then thousands of good companies up and down the country in all our constituencies will be put out of business.

Finally, I strongly welcome the measures announced today on the strategy for improving UK energy supply. A number of Members have raised different energy sources that they want more movement on. I will just flag up the enormous opportunity that is opening up on the Celtic sea, with floating offshore wind. This is a really good, timely moment for the Government, working with the Crown estate, to accelerate progress on those projects. However, none of that, including the new nuclear power stations that some Members want to see, is an immediate answer. There are not many levers immediately available to the Government this winter, with a potential energy supply crisis. We are looking at gas supply, and I encourage the Government to sharpen their strategy on the procurement of more liquified natural gas cargoes, so we can guarantee that we can get the energy coming into our system to keep the lights on this winter.

1.27 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Some of the announcements are welcome, particularly the focus on people who are not on the grid. I would like to highlight to the Government Front Benchers—I hope they will go away and seek more clarity on this—the people who resell energy. They are often landlords in blocks who buy the energy on the commercial market and resell it to their tenants. The Government have never explicitly mentioned that. They have talked about heat networks, which is if the landlord is running a boiler, but not about landlords they are supplying the electricity directly to a flat. Those meters are not on the official meter grid and they will not even be eligible for the £400 support from the Government unless action is taken. There needs to be some urgent action to ensure that landlords can purchase at fair prices and that they pass them on. At the moment, the landlord has to pass the cost on at the purchase price. I am not saying that landlords are gouging, but there is a problem that the purchase price is a commercial price, not a residential price. I hope the Government will come back with clarity on that.

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

The reality is that this package is still a £500 increase on what energy bills are today. This is not a reduction; it is an increase. It did not need to be like this. We could have regulated the wholesale market price, and the Government could have stepped in and offered loans to energy companies to bridge the gap for the gas they are importing. That could have been the offer, with the debt put on the energy companies and not the state, but that is not what has been put forward. The Government could have fixed energy prices at what they are today and made interventions, but we have not seen that either. Therefore, there are real difficulties relating to who pays. Does this come from the profits of the companies or is it done on the backs of the people? I am afraid that the wrong choice has been made, because future generations, and even this generation in future years, will pay for this policy. That does not seem right.

Improvements of efficiencies were mentioned slightly but not enough. We need a house-to-house, street-by-street approach to insulation—as my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), has called for—to get this right. Leaving it to the market does not work. We will not get the efficiencies of scale. Labour has put forward a plan to start that process, but even more ambition is needed.

We also need to look at the production of wind energy not just offshore, but onshore, and having solar panels on our roofs. At the moment, the solar panel feed-in tariff is less than the cost of buying energy directly from the market. That does not work; we need to reverse it. We need to give people the incentive to pay into the grid at a fair market price—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

1.30 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): All summer, like many Members, I have been hearing from households, businesses, schools and other public sector organisations and community centres that have been worried about their energy bills going up fivefold, in many cases. I therefore warmly welcome the speed and ambition of the package, which will bring much certainty to businesses and peace of mind to households and others.

I welcome the fact that we were clear about the discretionary funding that will be provided for users of heating oil, of which I have many in my constituency. I also welcome the reform of the electricity pricing market, so that non-gas power producers are more fairly priced, which will lower the cost for many users. The clarity that has been provided for those who are switching contracts and will not face exit penalties will, again, be very positive for many.

Instinctively, I would have preferred a targeted support programme. However, from the work that I have been doing over the past 12 months and longer in the Treasury on the cost of living, I will say that there are challenges with that approach. We know where all the people are who use energy and who are on benefits, but we do not know much about middle-income people. We tried, through a council tax band approach, to target this a bit more, but it is imperfect, so I think the universal approach

that has been adopted is right, because we cannot let middle-income households go to the wall. The truth is that when energy prices are going up by so much, there are many people outside the benefit system who may be on £30,000 or £40,000 who would be struggling hugely without this programme.

We cannot deny, however, that there are problems when price signals are distorted through price controls. I was therefore very pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk about energy efficiency and energy security and supply, which will be critical if we get through this period.

I want to come back to the windfall tax and the £170 billion that Opposition Members have mentioned multiple times. They know that those profits are not being made here and are not taxable. I know they know that because they set out their plans a week ago and they wanted to recoup only £8 billion from the oil and gas companies. If they truly thought that £170 billion was up for grabs—we know how much they love grabbing profits—why did they not set out £20 billion, £30 billion, £50 billion or even £100 billion? It is because they know that that is not possible. Actually, we did introduce an increase in their taxes. Oil and gas companies are paying not the 19% corporation tax that other companies pay, or even the 40% that they pay normally, but 65%. Two thirds of their profits are coming into the tax system. If they can invest as much of the rest of it as possible, that is what we will need for long-term solutions to protect our households, businesses, schools, charities and more.

1.33 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Ddirprwy Lefarydd. Hoffwn ddanfôn dymuniadau gorau i'w Mawrhydu'r Frenhines. I, too, would like to send my best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen.

Today's announcement shows beyond doubt whose side the new Prime Minister is on. She is prepared to force taxpayers to carry the burden of borrowing billions of pounds to subsidise the shareholders of energy companies that are profiting from Putin's war. It is shocking that she cannot even tell us how much that burden will cost today. I urge her to think again. Make energy companies pay their fair share. The global energy norm of energy profit taxation is 70%. Norway stands at 78%. Why does the population of the UK have to suffer the combined yokes of higher taxes, worse public services and falling real wages while private profit is protected under her premiership?

We should use that money to return the energy price cap to the pre-April level of £1,277 a year and extend that cap to small businesses and charities. People are struggling now. Even at current prices, 180,000 households in Wales are forced to struggle even to afford items such as heating, food and toiletries. Bills of £2,500 are unaffordable for many, many people.

Anything short of £1,277 as a cap will fail to meet the scale of the crisis that we face. It will require the Prime Minister's Government—this is important—to introduce additional packages of support for vulnerable households, including doubling the £650 cost of living payment and revising the eligibility criteria to include those on disability benefits who are currently excluded from support. That will cost us more in future if we do not deal with what is genuinely facing us. Instead of pursuing fantasy economics

of rampant deregulation and tax cuts for the rich, the Prime Minister must also prioritise a reduction in energy demand and investment in low-carbon sources. That is the only way to bring down energy bills in the medium and long term.

Let me be clear and simple. It is time to unchain Wales's renewable and low-carbon energy potential by vastly improving our grid capacity; bringing forward small modular reactors at Trawsfynydd in my constituency, Wylfa and other places; empowering the Welsh Government to deliver large-scale, transformative infrastructure projects, such as tidal lagoons; devolving management of the Crown Estate to Wales; and enabling community energy schemes to realise their full potential by selling their power directly to local customers. For us in Wales, it is clear that, in the long term, to fix this crisis for good, we must place our energy system and its huge potential in the hands of the people of Wales, for the benefit of the people of Wales.

1.36 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Given the announcement earlier, I also send my best wishes and the best wishes of all those across Watford to Her Majesty the Queen.

The announcement on energy costs today was very important. Over the summer, I spent lots of time volunteering with organisations, from the citizens advice bureau to working in the British Heart Foundation shop, and I heard at first hand about the challenges and fears that people have about the fuel crisis and their bills. We heard today about a significant package that will not only help people immediately, but deal with the long-term challenges, and we are making sure that the proposals work economically. As we all know, windfall taxes are a one-off—potentially a two-off, if we can call them that. However, once we get to the third or fourth try, they will not work, so we need something that works immediately and in the long term and which puts us on a competitive footing around the world.

We heard an important point about the fact that, by 2040, we want to be a net energy exporter. That means many things, including not just, importantly, our fuel security, but investment in jobs, investment in education, investment in skills and investment in business to make sure that we look ahead to the long term, so that we are not in this situation again—we do not want to be—and to help other countries around the world not to be in this position again.

I will make a final point, because I am conscious that you would like short speeches, Madam Deputy Speaker—and if anything, I am short. I studied physics at university—I am probably one of the few MPs who studied nuclear physics as part of my course, not that I was that great at it—and I think that the talk of moving forward with nuclear is so important. There has been a negative image of nuclear over many decades. The opportunity to have small modular reactors across the country that enable us to have safe, green energy that entire communities can rely on is essential. That is also about an infrastructure of skills and education.

I massively welcome this package and think it is the right one. There is more to do, of course—as always—but I welcome this debate. We can be certain of one thing, which we need to say to all our residents who are fearful of what may come: this will support them in the short

term. Although people may disagree about the long-term approach, this will support them now and in winter and they should feel reassured that they are going to be okay.

1.39 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): When people talk about famines, they think of food shortages, but in fact famines are a combination of higher prices and lower wages. We are approaching famine conditions in Britain because after 12 years of UK austerity, with cuts in services, frozen wages and the devaluation of the pound, our people are much weaker facing the tsunami of price rises that we have seen from Putin's brutal war.

The response from the oil companies, of course, is that their operating costs are just the same but their prices go up. They make windfall profits. They have picked the pockets of British people, and we demand our money back. There is a sort of windfall tax at the moment; as has been said, it should be continued at international rates so that people do not face yet another £500 coming out of their household budgets. Millions of people are in desperate poverty and simply cannot afford that.

The Prime Minister rightly talks about growth, but what she needs to remember is that the OECD has found that there is less growth if there is greater inequality. At the same time, she talks about giving back national insurance so the bottom 10% get an extra £7.60 and the top 10% get £1,800. In other words, she will increase inequality by putting more burdens on households, giving the rich more in tax giveaways, including national insurance, and not taxing the excess and unjustified profits of big corporations.

The OECD has also found that growth is very much linked to the education of the poorest. The Government's ambition is simply to get education spending up to 2010 levels by 2024, but they will not even achieve that because of inflation. Coretta King famously said that poverty is a child without an education. We have seen education standards falling throughout the pandemic, particularly for the poorest, so we need to invest. Meanwhile, the Government are provoking a trade war with the EU over the protocol, Bank of England rates are likely to go up, and they are provoking strikes with the trade union movement.

What we want is growth. What we saw with the Labour party in the 10 years to 2008 was 40% growth in the economy that allowed us to double investment in education and in health. Had trend growth continued at Labour Government levels, the average income in Britain would have been £10,000 higher, so there would have been more resilience to the external shocks of the pandemic and the energy crisis. We need to think about that, and we need to invest in hydrogen instead of fracking and in renewables instead of more and more oil.

1.42 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I join all colleagues, here and not here, and everyone in Gloucester in sending the warmest wishes of support to Her Majesty the Queen and to members of the royal family.

Today's announcement, which was made within 48 hours of the new Government being formed—no small achievement—will bring huge certainty and reassurance

[Richard Graham]

to residents in my constituency and elsewhere, to those living in park homes, to charities and to those across the public sector, as well as to the small businesses in particular that are already suffering. It is critical, because it puts a cap on the maximum average energy bill. The crucial word is “maximum” because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) said, there are huge advantages in a programme of advice and best practice being led by the Government and helping us all to reduce our energy consumption. Schools, for example, could hugely benefit from solar panels that could sell all the energy generated during the long summer holidays into the grid, thereby bringing their annual bills down considerably.

There are lots of good things to welcome in today’s announcement, but there are a few things in particular that I would like to raise with Ministers. First, the green levies that will now be temporarily suspended have already been committed elsewhere. Who is going to pay for them now? Presumably it is the taxpayer in general.

Secondly, the national insurance contribution increase was predicted to raise £36 billion over three years for health and care budgets. How will that be delivered now? The task before our new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is big on generating better outcomes, but reducing the inputs will surely make that harder.

Thirdly, there is the contribution of energy companies. We have heard a lot today, quite rightly, about how they are already paying some 66% tax in real terms. None the less, there is a huge difference between profits, which are good, and war profiteering, which is bad. The new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy could shed light on how the energy companies are to contribute to this national challenge.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) said that the rules on fracking would be completely ripped up. I do not think that that is the case, because the crucial barrier is local support, which has been conspicuously absent so far. I doubt that we will see any real change in practice.

There is one last thing to add. A lot has been said about the welcome commitment from this Government to nuclear and renewables,

“to embrace diverse sources of energy.”

May I encourage the new Secretary of State to follow the great example of his predecessor in supporting marine energy?

1.45 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I paid particular attention to the very small note that came out from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy earlier, especially the line that says:

“This will save the typical household £1000 a year.”

One thousand pounds a year? It is almost as if the cap that is being put in place at £2,500 a year is not double what energy prices were just last summer. It is almost as if the Government do not understand the sheer scale of the financial problems facing households right across the country. It is not just about energy prices. Inflation is at a 40-year high, interest rates are at a 30-year high

and wages are at a 20-year low, yet we are being told that we should be happy about energy bills being frozen at £2,500 per year. It is absurd.

Obviously it is not just households that will struggle, but businesses. A number of businesses have been spoken about today, and I have spent most of the summer getting emails from businesses that are being utterly crippled by the costs in front of them. Up to now, the Government have not even lifted a finger, and what they are proposing will not go far enough. Businesses will continue to close because of energy prices.

This whole debate really frustrates me for a particular reason, which is that I happen to represent a constituency famed for oil and gas production. Somewhat ironically, it was the Unionist parties in this Chamber that told us in 2014 that oil and gas were running out, yet now they tell us that 100 additional new licences will be given out. Barring that irony, however, is it not absurd that energy-rich Scotland, which produces six times more gas than we use, is even having to face an energy prices crisis? Gas makes up just 14.4% of our electricity production, yet the price of that gas dictates all.

The fact that the vast majority of our electricity comes from low-carbon sources means absolutely nothing. The fact that it comes primarily from renewables means absolutely nothing when it comes to the costs being imposed on the people of Scotland by this UK Government and the continued failure of their energy policy. If the UK Government want to do just one thing, here is a suggestion for the new Secretary of State: will this Government finally decouple renewables from gas prices? That would make a huge difference, and it would not cost a single penny.

1.48 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Following Mr Speaker’s announcement, I join other hon. Members in passing on my warmest wishes, on behalf of the people of Basingstoke, to Her Majesty the Queen and her family.

I warmly welcome the rapid action that the Government and the Prime Minister have taken since the new Government’s formation earlier this week—not only the short-term support that has been announced today, but the focus on long-term solutions to the problems we face. Clearly the energy price guarantee will provide enormous certainty and reassurance to many, many families, including those who have contacted me over the summer months.

I think that, following what some Members have said today, the Government will want to take some time to ensure that there is clarity about how the new energy price guarantee will sit alongside the existing energy bills support scheme, which will already be providing a great deal of support for many of the vulnerable groups to which Members across the House have referred. Both schemes will ensure that people have the support and certainty that they need in these difficult times.

Following representations that I have received from people who live in park homes and are on heat networks or who, like many of my constituents, use heating oil, I was especially pleased to hear that they would receive support. However, may I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and suggest that it would be useful to know exactly how that support will come into play?

I was extremely pleased to hear from the Prime Minister about the support for businesses, charities and public services, which will be equivalent to the support for residential properties for six months, although, again, it would be helpful to understand quickly how that might work in practice. Charities, in particular, will be planning up to 12 months ahead for how their operations will work. Many of them operate in community centres and village halls, providing childcare facilities that are essential for our residents.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to broaden the debate by encouraging the Government to bear in mind industries that have been hit by the increase in gas prices? I am thinking particularly about the fertiliser industry. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, gas is used to create fertiliser, which is why it is relevant to the debate. The scaling back of production throughout Europe means that many farmers, particularly those in my constituency—I met some of them on Friday—are sowing seed for harvesting next year without knowing whether fertiliser will be available. Perhaps the Government could make an early statement on how we will provide surety of supply, given the impact of gas prices on their production.

We are in a difficult situation, and I am pleased that the Government have acted so speedily.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. May I just point out that if Members speak for less than three minutes, we will get more of them in? I call Imran Hussain.

1.51 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): We must not forget that for months this Tory Government saw the oncoming tidal wave of rising energy bills this winter, but chose to do nothing about it. For months they callously and deliberately left people in limbo, creating unimaginable uncertainty for those who face colossal energy bills this Christmas, and for months they let fear spread among those preparing to make a desperate choice between heating their homes or putting food on the table. What is worse, however, is that for months the current Prime Minister, who was a Minister in this Government for a decade, was content to go along with this grossly negligent plan of inaction, wasting valuable time when we could have been protecting people.

Today we heard the Prime Minister, at the Dispatch Box, refer a number of times to “immediate” and “urgent” support. That is disingenuous, frankly. The Prime Minister cannot suddenly pretend that she entered the Government just today. She has been a senior Minister in previous Governments for the last decade, and she could have taken action—along with the previous Government—months ago, rather than putting people through this uncertainty.

As is customary among Conservative Members, there have been a number of instances of smoke and mirrors. We have heard numerous references to a price freeze, but it is simply not true that prices are being frozen. As has been pointed out by other Members, what we are seeing is a rise of at least £500 in the price that people are currently paying, and a rise of hundreds of pounds more in the price that they were paying originally—hundreds of pounds more than my constituents can afford to pay.

There has also been silence from the Prime Minister on who will actually pay for this. What is crystal clear—the Prime Minister has spelled it out—is that those who will not pay for it are the corporate oil and gas barons who have made a profit of £170 billion. In this, her first week as Prime Minister, she has made her direction of travel absolutely clear: she will go on driving a wedge between those who continue to become wealthier and those who continue to suffer poverty, and she will always side with the big corporations rather than with ordinary working people.

1.55 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): May I, too, send my deepest thoughts and good wishes to Her Majesty the Queen and her family? I am sure that the people of Dudley North will want to send theirs as well.

We know that too many people have borne the brunt of covid in recent times, and that too many are bearing the brunt of the cost of living crisis in which we now find ourselves. Some of them say to me, “Marco, what are you doing to help us? I am going to have to choose whether to turn on my hot water or feed my children.” As for local businesses, a local business owner contacted me this week saying they are having such extreme difficulties with energy prices that they feel they have no choice but to streamline staff in order to continue trading and paying their bills.

No one should ever find themselves in a position in which they have to make such choices, whether they are a business or a household. Ordinary hard-working people should not be suffering with anxiety about how they will make ends meet this winter. Like our new Prime Minister, I want to ensure that my constituents—indeed, all our constituents—have the support they need and have certainty for the months ahead. I am therefore pleased that the Prime Minister is taking immediate action to provide support and peace of mind for so many.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the words that I would like to use to describe Vladimir Putin are not appropriate for the polite company of the House, but it is because of him that we are having this debate. Of course, covid did play a large part in the cost of living crisis, but it is Putin’s bully-boy tactics that are cutting off Europe’s energy supply and plunging us into the freezing waters that we are facing. Putin does not care whether Jenny in Gornal can feed her children and get them to school. Putin does not care whether Dorothy in Sedgley can heat her home in her old age. Putin does not care whether John in Dudley has to close his business and lay off all his staff because he cannot pay his energy bill and continue to employ them. Putin just does not care—but I do, and I know that all of us here do.

Winter is coming and we know what could come with it, but it does not need to be an inevitability, and now, thanks to our new Prime Minister, it will not be. The long-term plan to strengthen and secure Britain’s energy supplies, reopening the North sea, opening up fracking and investing in nuclear, will ensure that our children and grandchildren do not face these issues as they reach our grand old ages. The new support being pledged today goes a long way to reassure individuals, families and our local businesses. Our new Prime Minister is on our side, not just in the short term but in the long term.

1.57 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Earlier this week I raised the plight of households, small businesses and care homes in my constituency. I am sure that, like me, many of them will be truly shocked that it is the British public who will have to bear the burden of paying for this energy crisis while energy companies continue to make their millions. Today, however, I have a number of specific questions to put to Ministers, and I ask the Minister who will sum up the debate to address them.

The written ministerial statement refers to an equivalent guarantee for businesses. Does that include care homes, and what additional support will they be given in view of the pressure that they are under? I also want to raise the subject of women's street safety. I have received an email from my local council, Hertfordshire County Council, saying that the bill to keep streetlights on has increased by 60% in just a few short months, and it already costs an extra £2.3 million a year to keep them on after dark. The council is not yet talking about turning the lights off, but if it does, will there be contingency measures in place to ensure that we keep crime down and that people—particularly women—are safe on our streets after dark?

I welcome the announcement of a fund to cover park homes, and people on heat networks and those who use heating oil, but how will the fund work, how big will it be, and will there be an information campaign aimed at those who can benefit from it? The Government's own estimates suggest that one in every 100 households is impacted by that non-conventional relationship. By my calculations, that is more than a quarter of a million properties. For each of them to receive £400, there would need to be at least £100 million in that fund.

We need a revolution in renewables. RES is the world's largest independent renewables company and is based in my constituency of St Albans. It has more than 40 years of experience and expertise. RES tells me—and Friends of the Earth agrees—that footnote 54 of the national planning policy framework stops it from installing new onshore wind farms even in areas where there are no objections from local residents. I am absolutely no fan of fracking, but it is absolutely obscene and absurd that this Government are saying that it is okay to reopen fracking if communities are okay with it, but not onshore wind. I asked them please to review that footnote.

Finally, on solar panels, in January I asked the Housing Secretary to make it a requirement for all new suitable buildings to have solar panels. The Government have not conducted the assessment of how much roof space is available, but I urge BEIS to go further than looking at the floor space that is available in these non-domestic buildings and work out precisely how much roof space is available right now to have solar panels installed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Virginia Crosbie, but let me emphasise again that if everybody spoke for just two minutes, we would have a much better chance of getting everybody in.

2.1 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I share in the thoughts and prayers for our Queen and her family.

The energy crisis has hit rural communities such as mine on Ynys Môn particularly badly. On Ynys Môn, schools, shops and employment are often too far away for walking and public transport is sparse. A car is not a luxury; it is a necessity. As our farming community relies on vehicles and fuel-driven equipment, their production costs have risen significantly. We have a larger than average elderly population who need to stay warm in our sometimes harsh winters, and many of my constituents are reliant on liquified petroleum gas and gas to fuel their homes. That is common in rural communities, but there is often little local competition. With no price cap, families are vulnerable to steeply rising costs, and I am pleased that that is being addressed.

My Ynys Môn constituents need help, and they need help today and over the coming months to heat and power their homes and businesses. Our Prime Minister has now outlined her plans, and I am hugely proud of the support that we are providing to help with the immediate problem, which is on top of the £37 billion committed by the former Chancellor. We need to do more to protect the UK from such crises in the future. I know that our Prime Minister has not lost sight of the longer term while providing support in the short term, and I welcome her enthusiasm for nuclear. She has already spoken about the need to take back control of our energy security, invest now in large-scale energy production and incentivise communities to support energy production in their area.

The people of Ynys Môn, which is also known as energy island, already welcome that local production. Companies such as Morlais and Minesto have received Government backing to set up tidal energy systems off our shores. We are home to stretches of offshore wind and solar farms thanks to Government subsidies and support. We have Wylfa, once a flagship of British nuclear power with all the potential to reclaim that position following this Government's commitment in the British energy security strategy and the new Nuclear Energy (Financing) Act 2022. The Holyhead hydrogen hub received £4.8 million of funding in last year's Budget. With companies such as Bechtel and Rolls-Royce keen to re-establish nuclear production at Wylfa and BP Mona looking to Ynys Môn to support large wind farms in the Irish sea, my constituency can be at the forefront of UK power generation for decades to come.

A new large-scale nuclear plant at Wylfa on Anglesey could generate enough power for every home in Wales and more, and small modular reactors could provide cheap energy to local families and businesses in shorter timescales. On behalf of my Ynys Môn constituents, let me say that it is important that the Government take into account the unique energy demands of rural communities' in short-term support plans and that we grasp the benefit of incentivising communities to welcome local energy production so that we can secure our long-term domestic energy supply swiftly.

2.4 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Six months ago, households faced energy bills of £1,300. Today, we are told that doubling that and fixing prices at £2,500 is the best we can do to help. It is not. People were struggling with their energy bills last winter and many more will struggle this winter, too, with prices doubled. Private energy profits are being put before the needs of people

all while energy firms are set to make £170 billion in excess profits. This is a huge transfer of wealth with big corporations hoovering up even more of the wealth in society, paid for by millions of ordinary people. The new Prime Minister, a former Shell employee, has been frank: energy firms, in her view, should be able to keep those undeserved excess profits.

A different principle should guide us. The companies should not be allowed to make a single penny from excess profits in this crisis. That will require a package of measures from public ownership to full windfall taxes and caps on the prices at which North sea oil and gas can be sold. That should all be guided by the principle that energy should be run for the public good. The public support these policies. There are growing movements for them. The debate is not going away; today has not solved this crisis.

Today's announcement on energy prices, without a windfall tax, does not limit the profits of the North sea oil and gas companies, and it is at great social cost. The claim that we need to protect the profits of North sea oil and gas firms to guarantee their investment is completely bogus, because they were investing when they were making their normal profits just a few months ago. They were never expecting this windfall. Taxes on oil and gas companies overseas, including in Norway's North sea fields, are much higher than they are here, even at current windfall tax rates.

Energy security cannot be achieved by making ourselves more dependent on the expensive fossil fuels that have driven this crisis. We do not need more North sea exploration. We do not need fracking. Let us be clear: that gas will not be cheaper. It will be sold at world prices and, anyway, gas is nine times more expensive than renewables. Retrofitting would save people money and reduce our gas use, so the greater reliance on fossil fuels is quite simply ideological. The Government are using the crisis to undermine their own inadequate climate responsibilities.

The profits of fossil fuel companies are being put before the people and before the planet. This approach is quite simply failing people who are today hit by higher bills, and I am afraid that it will also fail future generations hit by climate catastrophe.

2.7 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The speed and scale of the support announced by the Prime Minister is hugely welcome and, obviously, hugely necessary for the many households that simply could not have afforded energy bills of £3,500. Together with the £400 payments to each household, the £650 to those on low incomes and the £300 to pensioner households, it will make a real difference. I hope that we can have some clarification on the position of those residential properties that are on commercial meters, perhaps because they were converted from commercial businesses.

The support will also make a real difference to many businesses, whether they are energy-intensive businesses, such as those in ceramics and glassmaking in my constituency, or whether they are in hospitality. Similarly, perhaps we can have further clarification on the position for those businesses that have recently had to enter into new contracts. Will they still be able to switch to the new price cap or the support that has been announced?

Let me deal with the criticisms that have been made. There is some superficial political attraction to extending the windfall tax—of course, we already have a windfall tax set at 25% on top of the 40% tax already paid by British oil and gas producers. The attraction is more superficial and political than real and effective, because the revenue that an extension would raise would be small in comparison with the cost of the necessary support. It would affect less than half of the oil and gas we use in the UK, because that is what is produced in the UK. Making UK oil and gas production less competitive will, in the medium and long term, reduce our energy security at the worst possible time. That is something that we cannot afford.

It has also been suggested that the package will affect price signals. As a reformed economist, I know that economists can sometimes dwell a bit too much on good theory and ignore the real world, but I find it hard to credit that people would be less careful with their energy when the price cap is at £2,500 than they would be if it were £1,000 higher. Clearly there would be a huge impact if energy were free, but we are already at a level at which people are being very careful with what they use.

This is the right package, and it is an effective package. We need to get it into the pockets of households and businesses—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

2.10 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Although any help is welcome, this package is insufficient by far for the poor and generous in the extreme for the rich. The perversity of having an energy-rich Scotland and fuel-poor Scots remains, and it is clear that not only will people grow cold this winter but some may well die. There should have been a full freeze, and it should have been funded through a windfall tax. There should have been action on VAT, and there are other omissions that have not been addressed and where a lack of clarity remains. We need to change the dysfunctional energy market, not just accelerate nuclear or fracking, and address the iniquities that still exist and that have not been touched, or at least made clear.

First, the injustice of prepayment meters remains: the poorest and most deprived, who are often most dependent on power and energy, are paying higher standing charges and higher tariffs. That has not been touched, while support has been given to the very wealthy, and it must end. It is easily done through a direction to Ofgem, and we all know the energy companies are capable of delivering it.

Similarly, although there is a welcome announcement that some action will be taken on unregulated fuels, a discretionary fund would be inadequate. That is especially the case in the north of Scotland, but it is also the case in my constituency. People who are off the gas grid depend on heating oil, biomass and other fuels. Those fuels should not only be covered by a fund that people might be able to dip into; the fuels should be regulated. The Secretary of State should ensure action is taken, because people in the coldest areas are the ones who will suffer.

[Kenny MacAskill]

Our dysfunctional electricity system remains. It is tied to the price of gas, yet 97% of Scotland's domestic electricity supply is produced from renewables. We are paying sky-high prices that depend on foreign gas prices, as opposed to the price of the renewables on our doorstep and of which we have a surfeit. That is perverse, especially when, as others have said, Scotland is self-sufficient in gas.

This package simply rewards the rich; it does not address the problems of the poor. It is inadequate, and enough is enough. This is not enough to end the crisis, nor is it enough to end the action that people will take.

2.12 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): My thoughts and prayers, and the thoughts and prayers of everyone in Sevenoaks and Swanley, are with Her Majesty the Queen and the royal family at this time.

I warmly welcome today's announcement. It will relieve a huge amount of anxiety for my constituents, for businesses such as Donnington Manor that are worried about being crippled by prices, and for schools such as Dunton Green Primary School whose energy bills are going up by 500%.

I am glad that heating oil and heat networks are included in the announcement, although I question whether those prices will be frozen. The prices have gone up extensively this year and have tripled in some cases, such as for the Bouchier Court heat network, so it would be helpful to have clarification on whether that price will be frozen or whether it will be allowed to go up, with compensation provided later.

I have previously spoken in this House about how it is illegal to cut off a household's water supply. A water company can recoup its costs through the courts, but it cannot cut off a household's water supply for reasons of non-payment. We should consider extending that to energy supply. There are some protections in place, and energy companies are not allowed to cut off a customer's supply during the winter months if they live on their own, if they are of state pension age or if there is a child in the house.

However, there is not enough protection. Ofgem has shown that one in seven households on a prepayment meter disconnected in 2019, so we should look at this seriously. We cannot have that number of disconnections, and the number is likely only to go up, when there is something we can do to send a very clear message that energy consumers will be safe this winter, so they do not need to worry, if it really comes to it, that their energy supply will be cut off. There would still be the mechanism by which costs can be recouped, but there would be a safety net for everybody. I think that would go a huge way towards reassuring people.

I welcome today's announcement, as it will really help my constituents. I hope to see further effort and work on ensuring the energy supply to households.

2.15 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I, too, send my best wishes to Her Majesty and her family.

We all recognise the need to help people with their fuel bills, and there is huge support among the public for a further windfall tax on oil and gas companies. As the companies have explained, they would still have plenty of money for future investment even after paying an additional windfall tax. The point is that the money is on the table now for the Government to use to help the people of the UK with their fuel bills. Under the Government's plan, however it is worked out, the help will be paid for by taxpayers. It is utterly disgraceful that the Government are not imposing a windfall tax to cover these energy costs.

I welcome that the Prime Minister mentioned those who are off the grid and who rely on heating oil, and those living in homes with arrangements such as the park homes on Poplar Court in Cross Hands, who are not directly billed by an energy company. All these households need to know, as soon as possible, how and when they will receive support and exactly how much it will be.

The Government have an appalling record on home insulation, energy efficiency, renewables and the transition away from fossil fuels. We have repeatedly called for a massive investment programme to insulate 9 million homes, 2 million of which could already have been done by this winter.

Investment in renewables is vital to tackling climate change and increasing energy security, but the economic case is ever stronger with these rapidly rising and unpredictable gas prices. The Tory Government have wasted years of precious time for the development of renewables, including through the moratorium on constructing onshore wind farms in England and the reduction in support for solar panels. We should have been far further ahead by now in our production of electricity through renewable means, and the fact we are not is due to this Government's abject failure to stimulate the production of renewables.

Luckily, we have devolved powers in Wales and we were able to continue with the development of wind power, but the Conservative Government were reluctant to look at the Swansea tidal lagoon. Now, thanks to the initiative, imagination and hard work of the Labour-controlled city and county of Swansea, the project will go forward.

The Government also cut the plans to electrify the railway line from Cardiff to Swansea, and they have no plans to electrify further into west Wales, on the grounds that it would not shorten journey times. If we generate electricity from renewables, electrification would not help to tackle climate change but would bring price stability.

Words are not enough. We now need the Government to make a massive effort to increase the production of electricity from all forms of renewables: onshore and offshore wind; tidal and other marine technologies; and solar. Importantly, they also need to invest in the national grid to ensure that we can all benefit from this renewable production. We want action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Felicity Buchan has one minute.

2.18 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome this bold, decisive and comprehensive measure, which is exactly the right thing to do. I particularly welcome the measures on communal heating networks, which are huge in my constituency with all my mansion blocks.

I like that we are focused on self-reliance. I tried to intervene on the Leader of the Opposition, because he rightly talked about self-reliance when it comes to energy, but part of the reason why we are not self-reliant is because, between 1997 and 2010, the Labour party failed to invest in renewables and other sources of energy, so our dependence on gas went from 32% to 46%.

All the measures announced today are welcome. I welcome the commitment to net zero, and I welcome the investment in renewables.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State, Edward Miliband.

2.19 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Before I address the issues in this debate, I send my best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen and her family. I know that all our thoughts, and the thoughts of the country, are with them at this time.

There are two central questions at the heart of this debate: have the Government responded to the emergency that we face in a way that is fair, and do they recognise the fundamental truth that the only way to end this crisis in the long term is to get off fossil fuels? I am afraid that, on today's evidence, the answer to both questions is no.

Let me start by discussing the plan unveiled by the Prime Minister earlier. Labour led the way on the energy price freeze. We called for it, despite doubts, including from the Prime Minister. I am glad that she has admitted she was wrong about that, because even though there have been disagreements, we have heard throughout this debate—I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken—agreement about the scale of the emergency facing families. That is why we spent the summer fighting for the energy price freeze. However, the devil will be in the detail and people will want to see the small print. The problem is that bills still seem to be rising by at least £129 a year.

The even bigger problem, and the fundamental issue in this debate, has been who pays. The right hon. Lady has been clear that she is against a windfall tax. We know the effects of that: it means that all the costs are loaded on to the British people. Let us dispose of the argument that this issue is somehow not about higher taxes; in the end, this intervention will have to be paid for by the British people in higher taxes. So the question is not whether we are going to tax to pay for it, but whom we are going to tax.

Let us take the arguments we have heard in this debate against the windfall tax and take them apart one by one. First, we have the argument that a windfall tax will reduce investment. Is there any truth to that? As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said in his eloquent speech, the BP boss says that it will not have an effect on investment; when asked what

investments it would affect, he said, “None of them.” So even BP does not believe the argument the Prime Minister is mounting in defence of BP.

Next, we have heard the argument that a windfall tax cannot raise extra money beyond what the former Chancellor announced. Let us dispose of that argument, too. I gather that there is a dispute about the figure of £170 billion in excess profits. The current Chancellor is not here, but I say to the Prime Minister: publish the Treasury's estimate of excess profits. If it is not £170 billion—we have it on good authority that it is—the estimates should be published so that we can all see them for ourselves.

Dame Andrea Leadsom *rose*—

Edward Miliband: I am not going to give way, because I have little time for the wind-up.

In any case, we know that tens of billions could be raised. First, there are significant resources from the windfall tax on the oil and gas companies, including through abolishing the absurd £5 billion loophole proposed by the Chancellor.

Next, we come to the electricity generators. We need to de-link the price of gas and electricity, but that will not happen for a number of years. In the meantime, these companies are making enormous profits. Onward, a conservative think-tank, said this week that up to £10 billion a year can be raised, while the Tony Blair Institute gave a figure of £14 billion. We could even have a cross-party consensus on this. Why would we leave this money in their pockets when it could help to pay for the action on energy?

The alternative that the Government appear to have adopted is to have a voluntary agreement whereby companies decide to opt in to reduce prices. I say to the House that that is a terrible proposal—it came originally from Energy UK—because in exchange for giving up some profits now, the deal will lock in higher prices over the next 15 years. This is not a good deal for consumers. A chart published by Energy UK—I am a nerd, so I read these charts—precisely sets out the fact that consumers will pay through the nose over the 15 years ahead.

The third and final argument we have heard in this debate, and indeed from the Prime Minister, is that a windfall tax is somehow unfair to business. Let me take advantage of her being present to recommend that she reads an article by Mr Irwin Stelzer, a long-time confidant of Rupert Murdoch. In my experience of Tory leaders, it is worth their while to stay on the right side of him. Mr Stelzer wrote:

“Now is the time for a windfall profits tax”.

He continued:

“People who believe in capitalism believe that private sector companies should be rewarded for taking risks...not be rewarded for happening to be around when some disruption drives up prices, producing windfalls.”

In this case, we are talking about the barbaric invasion of Ukraine.

What principle is the Prime Minister defending here? What is the hill on which she stands? Is the principle she really wishes to defend that oil and gas companies should pocket any scale of profits, however bad the political instability; that however large the crisis and however gigantic the windfall, taxation must not change; and that the British people must take the strain? That is the effect of her argument. The argument I am making

[Edward Miliband]

is not one simply made by leftie suspects such as me: Margaret Thatcher, her heroine, imposed a windfall tax in 1981; George Osborne, whom the Prime Minister worked for, imposed one in 2011; and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), her very close friend—[*Interruption.*] I think she is disavowing George Osborne, but I can understand that. As I was saying, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip imposed a windfall tax two months ago. So the Prime Minister is flying in the face of logic, fairness and common sense, and is engaging in tens of billions of pounds of borrowing that she does not need to engage in. Let us never, ever hear again lectures from the Conservative party on fiscal responsibility after the decisions it is making today.

That brings me to the longer term. Let us face facts: the only way out of this crisis is to get off fossil fuels. I can do no better than quote the words of Lord Deben this week. He said that

“if you want to deal with climate change and you want to deal with the cost of living crisis and oil and gas prices, you have to do the same things. Renewable energy and energy efficiency, they are the answers.”

I would add nuclear to that, but the central point is that solar and wind energy are nine times cheaper than gas. We cannot solve the fossil fuel crisis by doubling down on fossil fuels, but that is what the Government have done today with this announcement on fracking. My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition quoted the words of the new Chancellor that fracking would make no difference to prices and would take years to come on stream. I do not know where the Prime Minister got the six months she mentioned in her statement, but the Chancellor was saying only a few months ago that it would take 10 years to get anything out of the ground on fracking.

This is where I come to the Business Secretary, whom I congratulate. He and I have known each other a long time and we have had a good personal relationship—perhaps we can form an unlikely alliance on the issues that we face. I want to make a serious point to him about some of what he has said in the past, because it relates to these issues. He has said a number of things about climate. I have been part of the work done on building a cross-party consensus on climate for getting on for 20 years in this House, and we have to look at some of what he has said about climate. He has questioned the modelling and whether there is anything we can do about the climate crisis. In 2017, he said:

“If we were to take action now, to try and stop man-made global warming, it would have no effect for hundreds or thousands of years”.

He went on to say that the cost of climate action is “probably unaffordable”. I quote those words because this is flirtation with climate denial. Never in the past 20 years have we heard these words from someone in charge of tackling the climate crisis, and we should not normalise it. The bipartisan consensus on climate change has been hard won. We have worked across parties over two decades to secure it and there is a heavy responsibility on the Business Secretary to be part of maintaining that consensus, not destroying it.

The problem for the Business Secretary, and the reason he faces that challenge, is that this problem is not just about the climate crisis, because not taking action

on green energy is a recipe for higher bills. The ban on onshore wind is driving bills higher and gas imports higher, and it is terrible for the climate. The blocking of solar, which the Prime Minister supports, is driving bills higher and gas imports higher, and it is terrible for the climate. The refusal to act on energy efficiency is driving bills higher and gas imports higher, and it is terrible for the climate. There is nothing more anti-business than scaring off investors in renewables with climate denial.

In conclusion, here is the truth about this new Government, only two days in. They have revealed their true colours. We face a social and economic emergency. In such an emergency, what matters is who you stand up for, who shoulders the burden and the choices you make. The Government have chosen to stand up for the oil and gas companies, not the British people, who will pay for this action in the long-term. The Government cannot answer the challenges of energy security. They cannot answer the challenges of energy bills. They cannot answer the challenges of the climate crisis. And they have the wrong priorities for Britain.

2.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): May I begin by adding my voice to those of other right hon. and hon. Members in wishing Her Majesty the Queen well from this House? It is a matter of the gravest concern to all of us when our sovereign is unwell.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister not only on her appointment, but on the way she has chosen to meet this energy challenge: with immediate and decisive action. I thank her for introducing this debate, for ensuring that the contents of her speech were not leaked beforehand, which shows a proper respect for Parliament, and for seeing that her policy is robustly debated in this Chamber.

I thank the Chancellor, my predecessor at BEIS, for paving the way for this announcement. I look forward to working very closely with him to ensure that households and businesses are protected this winter and beyond. I also thank the right hon. Gentleman the shadow Business Secretary for his kind words about me in his opening comments. Indeed, we have had a friendly personal relationship over some years. I hope we can continue that while having, no doubt, some less friendly debates on these fundamental issues.

We need to understand why we are here. We are here because Vladimir Putin has weaponised energy supply as part of his barbarous attack in Ukraine. Last week, he turned off the main pipeline to Europe. It is a deliberate blackmail tactic against the west. Britain's energy system must be strengthened and diversified to protect our homes and our businesses.

As we have heard over the course of this debate, our plan comes in two parts. First, we must get our constituents safely through this winter. We know how concerned people are about expensive energy bills. Some of the projected figures have been truly alarming and we are intervening to stave off an unprecedented crisis. It would be wrong to stand by as people struggle. I give the assurance to the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) that our plan for businesses will include care homes. That is fundamentally important. It would be madness to ignore other businesses too, as they see their bills spiral out of control.

The new energy price guarantee will ensure that bills are kept down, remaining at around £2,500 a year for the average consumer. This intervention reflects the severity of the situation we find ourselves in. The Government-funded support will take effect from 1 October, saving the average household around £1,000. That will be combined with the original support we announced.

I reassure the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who raised this question first, that we will act to help people on the lowest incomes. The Government have already announced a package of support that will see 8 million of the most vulnerable households receive £1,200 of one-off support to help with the cost of living, and all domestic electricity customers will receive £400.

We know that from biscuit makers to bars, businesses are worried about their bills. The Government's price guarantee for businesses, which will be announced shortly, will bring down energy bills for the acute phase of the crisis. All businesses on variable contracts, whose fixed-price contract is coming to an end or that have agreed a fixed-price contract recently will be eligible to enter the new Government-guaranteed contract. That will apply to businesses of all sizes and include schools, nurseries and care homes, as well as manufacturers and retail. That is the short term.

Quite rightly, Opposition Members, particularly the Leader of the Opposition, asked who is going to pay for this. The energy bills guarantee is not a direct loan to customers or to energy suppliers. However, as the price stabilises in due course, the Government will need to consider when and how to recoup at least some of the cost of the scheme. The Opposition are all for taxation, Madam Deputy Speaker. That should not surprise you, as you know the inner workings of the Labour party better than most. None the less, all we get from the other side is tax, tax and tax again. It may be that we are at the highest rate of taxation in 70 years, but the answer is always more tax. It is their only answer to any question. Even the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the leader of the SNP, who used to be a very successful businessman, and therefore may know a thing or two about this, was advocating higher taxes. Now that he is a humble crofter, perhaps he thinks that is easier.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the right hon. Member—we go back a long way. He is, of course, right that I have a background in the City. No doubt he has read Shell's quarterly figures, as I have done. Off the top of my head, the return on capital employed has gone up from 3% to 13%. By anyone's definition, that is excess profit. It is right at times such as this that we take our share of that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is structurally wrong. Taxes need to be certain. If we are to encourage investment—and we need investment in this country—the tax policy has to be set for the long term. We cannot retrospectively pick people's pocket; we need to tell them what the charge will be beforehand and keep it clear.

John Redwood: Would the Business Secretary like to remind the House that the Republic of Ireland deliberately chose much lower corporation tax rates than the rest of the advanced world and collects a far bigger proportion of its economy in taxes on business than we do?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend will be glad to note that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, from a sedentary position, is agreeing with him. My right hon. Friend is a higher authority on this than I am, but we know that the cut in corporation tax led to an increase in receipts. Higher taxation is not the answer.

Looking at the long term, we must fix our broken energy system. We must have energy independence and become a net exporter of energy by 2040. We cannot be held captive by volatile global markets or malevolent states. We must tackle the root causes of the problems in our energy market by boosting domestic supply. We will invest in renewable energy with vim and vigour, accelerating the deployment of wind, solar and—particularly exciting, I think—hydrogen technologies. To reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), we will invest in nuclear technologies, which also provide us with cheap and clean electricity.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) said that her constituency is known as energy island. That is exactly what we need in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) noted that not just Ynys Môn but the whole of the United Kingdom is energy island. We must use all the resources available to us, including tidal energy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said. This is a great opportunity.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would love to give way, but time is very short.

We are fully committed to green growth and the green industrial revolution, and to net zero by 2050, but we have to get there, and to get there we are going to need oil and gas. We are therefore going to have a new oil and gas licensing round, which we hope to launch in October. I reassure the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) that we will work with communities and individuals to use shale gas as well, with the support of those who may be affected. The pause on extraction is being lifted through a written ministerial statement and will come into effect immediately. This will allow us to gather further data on seismic safety. It is fundamentally important, as any economist knows, that pricing is set at the margin. If you have more, it helps bring prices down. That is fundamental. It is not in any way contradictory to what we have said before. We will also have legislation to support people in Northern Ireland, which is fundamentally important. We must be one United Kingdom in how we do this.

I am very grateful for the many contributions that were made in the course of the debate, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), my right hon. Friends the Members for Central Devon (Mel Stride), for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), for Watford (Dean Russell) and for Gloucester, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), and

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn, for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott). I commend the motion on the Order Paper to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I put the Question, I am very sorry that all right hon. and hon. Members were not able to get in to speak in the debate. It was very oversubscribed. I remind Members that it is important to get back in good time for the wind-ups in order to hear the responses to what people have said.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK Energy Costs.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before we move on to the next business, I wish to pass on my thoughts and best wishes, and those of the people of Doncaster Central, to Her Majesty the Queen and her family.

SOCIAL SECURITY (SPECIAL RULES FOR END OF LIFE) BILL [LORDS] (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [Lords]—

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed while the Question is put, in accordance with Standing Order No. 52(1) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills), on any financial resolution relating to the Bill;

(c) on the conclusion of proceedings on any financial resolution relating to the Bill, proceedings on the Bill shall be resumed and the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (13)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Subsequent stages

(8) (a) Any Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(11) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(12) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(13) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(14) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(15) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*David T.C. Davies.*)

Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [*Lords*]

[*Relevant document: e-petition 613198, Fast-track access to benefits for terminally ill as soon as diagnosed.*]

Second Reading

2.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to move the Second Reading of the Bill in this role, and I welcome the new member of my ministerial team, the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who will be at the Dispatch Box for the later stages of this Bill.

For a person to find out that their illness cannot be cured can be a frightening experience. As a Government, we are committed to do all that we can to alleviate the pressures facing those who are nearing the end of their lives and their families. To provide some financial security to those who find themselves in this difficult position, the Department for Work and Pensions has, since the 1990s, provided access to key benefits via what are often referred to as the “special rules”. These are benefit rules that enable people who are nearing the end of their lives to get fast-track access to certain benefits. Historically, people eligible under those rules have not had to wait as long as others to start getting benefit payments. They have not been required to go through medical assessments, and, in most cases, have qualified for higher rates of benefit. In order to access this fast-track route, people had to be assessed by their healthcare professional as having six months or less to live, and this became known as the six-month rule.

For more than 30 years, these special rules have ensured that, at this most difficult time, people have got the financial support to which they are entitled quickly and easily. None the less, since those rules were first introduced there have been significant advances in how the NHS treats and cares for people nearing the end of their lives, meaning that many terminally ill people are now living longer. Given these advances, in July 2019 the Department launched an in-depth evaluation of how the benefit system supports people nearing the end of their lives. As part of that consultation, the Department worked with those people, those who support them and clinicians.

The evaluation’s findings showed that there was consensus across all groups that the Government should extend the current six-month rule. It showed support for the DWP to adopt a 12-month end-of-life approach that would allow people in the final year of their life to claim under the special rules. An added benefit of the 12-month approach was that it would also bring greater consistency with the definition of “end of life” used within the NHS and across Government.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): May I be the first to congratulate the right hon. Lady on her appointment and say on behalf of the Work and Pensions Committee how much we are looking forward to working with her and her colleagues in the months ahead?

The Select Committee had previously suggested getting rid of the time period altogether and referring simply to people having a terminal illness, and that approach has

[Sir Stephen Timms]

now been taken in Scotland. Did the Department consider that in looking at this change, and, if so, what was the reason for rejecting it?

Chloe Smith: The Chair of the Select Committee makes, as ever, a thoughtful point. I very much look forward to working with him and the Committee. Yes, our evaluation did look at exactly that point. As I was just coming on to argue, our approach brings a greater consistency with the NHS, which considers people to be “approaching the end of their lives when they are likely to die within the next 12 months.”

That consistency is an important objective. At that 12-month point, clinicians are encouraged to think about the support that their patients need, including any financial support.

A point that I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister of State will draw out at Committee stage is that we also think it is important that clinicians can be supported to make the most consistent and straightforward decisions. Of course, in many cases that is not straightforward, but we want to enable clinicians to have the best chance of making a clear decision in support of their patient. That was the evidence that our evaluation found in favour of the 12-month definition. Indeed, that has been borne out by a great deal of support for what we have since been able to announce, which the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of from the various groups that support those in their last stage of life.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for presenting this Bill, as will be my constituents in Lichfield. We are blessed with a particularly wonderful hospice, St Giles Hospice in Whittington village. Has the Department spoken to clinicians and organisers at hospices such as our one in Lichfield?

Chloe Smith: Yes, that is absolutely the case. There have been extensive conversations with clinicians and those in the hospice movement more broadly. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all those who work in hospices such as the one he mentions in Lichfield and the many more across the country. They do such an important job in giving people comfort and support and the right care at the end of their life.

In announcing that the Government intend to move from that six-month criteria to the 12-month end-of-life approach, we have engaged very widely and endeavoured to communicate as clearly as possible so that people know what support is available.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her new position. I welcome the changes that the Government are introducing in this Bill, but as long as one in four terminally ill people of working age spends the last year of their life in poverty, I think that we need to go further. To that end, will the Minister meet me to discuss my Terminal Illness (Support and Rights) Bill, which will require utility companies to provide financial support to customers with a terminal illness and make the employment rights of people with a terminal illness more robust at no cost to the Exchequer. In fact, it may save the Exchequer a few pounds.

Chloe Smith: I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman is engaging seriously with this very important matter. I have seen his private Member's Bill and I know that my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be looking at it very closely in terms of the formal response from the Government. I can say that today's Bill is all about how to get the best type of financial support to people. I really hope that that means that he will join us in support of the principles and practice of this Bill in addition to his own campaigning work.

In April of this year, changes were made in secondary legislation to the eligibility criteria for the special rules in respect of universal credit and employment and support allowance. These changes have been well received by the key charities that are active in the area as well as by parliamentarians and the public.

The special rules definition, however, for personal independence payments, disability living allowance and attendance allowance is set in primary legislation and therefore we need to be here today dealing with this primary legislation to change the eligibility criteria in those benefits from six to 12 months. This Bill, therefore, is a single issue, two clause Bill that makes those eligibility changes for these three benefits. As I have already explained, the changes put forward in the Bill will mean that, together with that secondary legislation, those expected to live for 12 months or less will be able to access that vital support via the fast-track process rather than waiting until they might meet the current six-month rule.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As the Minister mentioned in her response to the Chair of the Select Committee, in Scotland there have been changes to the process. It has been highlighted to me by Motor Neurone Disease Scotland that part of the challenge now is that the benefits assessment for special rules in Scotland—BASRiS—form and the DSI5000 form are required to be completed by clinicians. Can she advise us on what discussions she is having, because it would be very good if we could minimise that complexity?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We want to get the greatest amount of support as simply as possible to those who need it the most. To that end, my officials and I have been having extensive conversations with the Scottish Government. We would very much have preferred them to agree to a simpler way to ensure that we get the relevant details and the relevant paperwork. But, of course, this is not fundamentally about paperwork: we need to work together to get that support across both the reserved and the devolved benefits to those who need it most.

We are talking about thousands more people at the end of their lives who will be able to access the three benefits in the Bill and others in secondary legislation. We want a consistent end of life definition across health and welfare services that can be more easily understood by clinicians, end of life charities and patients. The alignment of the definition will allow clinicians in particular to include discussion of welfare benefits in wider conversations about what matters most to their patients, which will, in turn, be more responsive to their needs. We have already touched on how we hope that means that clinicians will be better supported by a more straightforward and simple definition.

Once the Bill is fully rolled out, between 30,000 and 60,000 more people may benefit from the special rules process each year. My Department recognises that it is essential that people are aware of and understand the changes. That is why there has been that extensive engagement that I referred to in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) with key end of life charities, hospices, medical organisations and clinical groups such as the royal colleges.

I pay tribute to the many people who have supported this work since the launch of the evaluation of how the benefits system can better support people nearing the end of their lives. Their expertise and personal experience has been crucial in better informing and enabling the important changes in the Bill. I pay tribute to all those who support patients at the end of their lives, and I am sure we would all agree that it is crucial when someone reaches the final stage of their life that they have that support. By passing the Bill today, we will provide thousands more people with vital financial support so that they can worry a little less about their finances and focus more on sharing the valuable time they have left with the people who matter most to them.

2.51 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to their new posts. I thank the Secretary of State for introducing this short but important Bill.

As we have heard, the intention of the Bill is to amend the definition of “end of life” in existing legislation, extending it from six to 12 months. That will have the knock-on effect of changing eligibility for disability living allowance, personal independence payment and attendance allowance so that individuals who are deemed by a clinician to have 12 months or less to live can have fast-tracked access to those benefits. We are, of course, supportive of those changes and have chosen not to table any amendments to the Bill. However, there are a number of points I would like to raise.

First, it is somewhat disappointing that it has taken the Government so long to bring in the changes. The Department first launched an in-depth evaluation of the special rules for terminal illness as long ago as July 2019. The findings showed clear support for extending the definition of end of life to 12 months. We then had to wait until July 2021 for the Government to announce their plans to bring in the change. In April 2022—a further nine months later—the Department amended the eligibility criteria for universal credit and employment and support allowance through regulation changes. Here we are another five months on and the necessary alterations to primary legislation to do the same for personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance are only just making their way through the House. It is a difficult but unavoidable fact that while we have been waiting for this to happen, people who could have benefited from the changes have passed away.

My second observation is that we need reassurance from the Department that fast track really means fast track, and I am grateful to the Minister of State for indicating her support for that approach. In her speech on Second Reading in the other place, the Minister, Baroness Stedman-Scott, estimated that the changes

brought forward in the Bill could mean that 30,000 to 60,000 more people may benefit from the special rules. She also stated that it currently takes an average of three working days for new claims and four working days for assessments for PIP under the special rules criteria. If those turnaround times are to be maintained, there will clearly need to be a significant increase in staffing capacity in the Department. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give us today that her Department will have the additional capacity needed?

Thirdly, I know that there are concerns among clinicians and others about the accuracy with which it is possible to determine that an individual is entering the final 12 months of their life. The new rules bring the Department’s definition of “end of life” in line with NHS guidance, which is welcome. However, the NHS itself acknowledges that it is,

“not always possible to predict”,

the end of life with complete certainty.

The Motor Neurone Disease Association, which, as we have heard, has done a lot of important work in pushing for this change, makes this case very clearly. Motor neurone disease often progresses very rapidly, with one third of people dying within a year of diagnosis and around half within two years. Yet it is impossible to give an exact prognosis, as the disease is so complex and unpredictable.

Under the current rules, many people living with MND are left to navigate the standard route for claiming benefits, which is entirely inappropriate given their circumstances. Although it is supportive of the changes, the association notes it would have preferred the UK Government to follow the Scottish example and introduce a criterion with no specific time limit, relying instead on the clinical judgement of a registered medical practitioner that the individual has a progressive disease that can reasonably be expected to cause their death.

That leads us to a further point: benefits awarded under the special rules are granted for three years. Where an individual outlives their prognosis and the three years expire, they then have to make a new claim despite, in some cases, being completely paralysed, unable to speak or ventilated. That adds an unnecessary extra burden to individuals and their families and carers at an extremely difficult time.

We also need absolute clarity around how clinicians will be informed of the changes and, most importantly, how the Department will ensure that the relevant information is communicated effectively and in a consistent, sensitive and timely fashion. It is one thing to legislate for these changes, but another to ensure that they are filtering through to those who most need to understand them.

I cannot finish without recognising the incredible toll that caring for someone who is sadly at the end of their life has on family members and friends. Some unpaid carers will have given up their own job and become financially dependent on social security payments. It is imperative that they are supported and prepared for the stopping of benefits when the person they are caring for passes away. It is unacceptable that people who have fulfilled such an important role and—we should be honest here—saved the public valuable money should be left both bereaved and, on occasions, destitute.

[Matt Rodda]

That is, of course, particularly the case for parents. It is easy to focus on older adults when considering end of life care, but of course that is also the reality of families with terminally ill children. I echo the calls made so eloquently by Baroness Finlay of Llandaff and Baroness Brinton in the other place for a wider review of the benefits available to families facing that awful situation.

For example, the families of seriously ill babies and small children do not currently have access to the mobility component of disability living allowance. Many of those children require round-the-clock care and use ventilators, monitors, oxygen and other vital equipment. Although DLA is available to all families who incur extra costs as a result of meeting the additional care or mobility needs of a child, only those with children over the age of three can receive the higher rate mobility component. I appreciate that that falls outside the scope of the Bill, but it ties in with the need to ensure that individuals and families are given as much support as possible in these most difficult of circumstances.

I finish by reiterating that we are fully supportive of this Bill. I look forward to hearing the valuable contributions that I know others will be keen to make and to this legislation's continuing to make its way through this House.

2.58 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): As the Minister at the time who triggered these very welcome changes, I am very proud to speak in this debate. I must say that in my 12 years as an MP this is definitely my proudest moment, and this legislation showed me the very best of politics and some of the more frustrating parts of politics—I am certainly free to share some of those behind-the-scenes things.

First, I pay tribute to the people who made this happen and got us here today, starting with many politicians. This was a genuinely cross-party initiative, but the three politicians who stood out the most for me were the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who will also be making a contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and Madeleine Moon, a former MP. Throughout the process, they were kind, sincere, very generous and incredibly patient, something I will come on to later.

The leading charities that provided many cross-party MPs with a reminder of the importance of the issue included the MND Association, Parkinson's UK and Marie Curie. The brains behind this legislation were a combination of my private office, Dr Emily Pikett, who is the DWP's medical policy adviser, and her team.

We configured a roundtable of the greatest, including those charities that I have mentioned, plus Macmillan, the Multiple System Atrophy Trust, Sue Ryder, the National Bereavement Alliance, Hospice UK, the British Medical Association, the National Nurse Consultant Group, the Association of Palliative Care Social Workers, the British Lung Foundation, the Queen's Nursing Institute, the Palliative Medicine Association and the Royal College of Physicians, and many, many hundreds more people who work on the frontline in healthcare and palliative care, along with families and patients, contributed. Ultimately, that showed what can be done when Parliament

is working at its best, because we have ended up with united support across the board and we are all very pleased, because this will make a genuine difference to people.

I share the shadow Minister's frustration that it took so long, believe me. I think I went through about five sets of DWP oral questions where the official line was: "We are working at pace across Government." Believe me, a little bit of my soul disappeared as I saw the regular reminders, predominantly from the hon. Member for Newport East, to explain just how quick "at pace" is, and as I wondered how I could come up with a slightly different variation of those words. In defence of, first of all, the parliamentary process, what would normally happen is that a Secretary of State would ask their Ministers to work out where they would like to prioritise some changes. That would be presented and then as a Department through negotiations with Treasury, particularly where things are going to cost more money, we would work out which ones we could deliver and when. If we have an idea that we want to do something, generally we try to work out how to get from A to B.

At the time, I was working for the wonderful Amber Rudd, who was just a whirlwind of enthusiasm and super sharp. Anyone who had to present their ideas to her really needed to be on top of their brief. She did not suffer fools, and this was one of the ideas that I pitched to her. Then I mentally thought, "Right, over the next three months we'll start working up some options and work out some costs." To my horror, the following morning, on Sky News I think it was, she announced that this was then a priority, so very quickly Emily Pikett and her team and I had to be locked away to try and come up with how we would get from A to B.

Initially, the general consensus of stakeholders is what we are now seeing proposed in Scotland. It would have been very tempting to follow that route, and certainly the intentions of the Scottish Government were good, but as they soon discovered, it is not that simple, because we are all terminally ill. Therefore, we cannot possibly give everybody the fast-track access to the benefit, because the system would be overwhelmed. It has to be prioritised for those who are within a certain period of time. What the Scottish Government have discovered is that they now have to create a whole raft of exemptions to the principle of just being terminally ill. They have now created an even more complex process than the original six months rule, which was deemed to be flawed because it was too complex.

Fundamentally, we arrived at this solution because—GPs are the best at summing this up—there is no worse role for a GP than to have to sit one of their patients down, someone who they have been supporting, and say, "We have reached the end of the road. We are now switching our focus to palliative care." As the current system stood, the GP would have to have that conversation twice, once at roughly the 12-month point and once at the six-month point, to trigger the fast-track process through the DWP for much-needed financial support. The very simple solution was to merge the two conversations together so that it is consistent.

That had the double benefit of reducing the need for the GP to have that dreadful conversation twice, but also, crucially, of raising awareness, because after that first conversation patients and their families understandably have got a million and one other priorities to navigate in

their precious final moments. At least now in that conversation, as the palliative care process is being planned, they can be made aware of this additional financial support, and in real terms this will typically reduce the period to access that support from 16 weeks to less than five days.

I understand the shadow Minister's point about making sure that is resourced. We can be confident of that, because the process is relatively straightforward. In effect, once someone has that note from the GP, the support is automatically triggered, which is why we do not need the 16 weeks. That helps with some of the pressures and will probably save a little bit of time for those who do wait 16 weeks by lifting them out of that unnecessarily long process.

It was a frustration in Parliament that this took so long, and it was one of those where everybody agreed. I remember a Treasury Parliamentary Private Secretary lobbying me very strongly on behalf of one of their constituents, saying, "You've got to get this sorted." I said, "Right, well you can take that back as a note to your own Department then, thank you very much."

I was absolutely thrilled that, just before my final few days as a Minister, we got the confirmation that we were able to make those immediate changes to the newer benefits. I am incredibly proud, as I said, that the Bill will now sort out the final parts of PIP, DLA and the attendance allowance.

My final plea is to our Scottish friends. I regularly met my Scottish ministerial counterpart, and I put it formally on the record that I absolutely understand that they did it with good intentions. I also understand that, as a matter of principle, they always want to do something different because, in their mind, that strengthens their case for independence. What they have done, however, is create a system that is more complex, because adult disability payments remain under the UK Government's control, so there is the nightmare scenario of still having the two things. All those stakeholders, particularly Marie Curie, would love to see the Scottish Government adopt our approach in this case, so that there is a consistent approach. Terminal illness is not a time for political divide and debate. That is my plea, so that everyone can benefit.

I thank everybody who made this possible. Everyone who has contributed will have made a genuine difference to people in their hour of need, and we can collectively be very proud.

3.6 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State and Ministers to the Front Bench. This Bill is a good place to start their new jobs. It is not a massive piece of legislation in its content, but its effect is seriously important for people. In welcoming it, it is important to stress that, but also to give voice to those who have suffered and had frustrations during the time that we have been waiting for this to happen.

This is a small but hard-fought step that will make the last days of life easier for the families and loved ones of those who are diagnosed with a terminal illness. Even though I still believe that the Bill does not go far enough, it is important to welcome that. Thousands of terminally ill people who were previously denied fast-track support will now get the help they need, which is hugely important.

There are also the thousands who did not get much-needed help in the time it has taken Governments to act. I heard the words of the previous Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and I will talk about some of the positive things in a moment, but all the pre-laid excuses about why it has taken so long do not cut ice with the people who have suffered. That should be acknowledged when we are talking about this important issue.

The action needed was simple: scrap the six-month rule and make life a little easier for folk who do not have long to live—or even to get their forms in—so they can receive support and advice. The ask was to get rid of the arbitrary date, which was inhumane; I still think that having an arbitrary date is inhumane, but it is better than what we had before. The moral imperative is, and always was, to just do the right and decent thing for people and give folk who are dying some dignity in whatever time they have left.

That is what the Bill will do in some measure. It will make a difference to those at the end of their lives. It will relieve the financial worries of families who have received the news that no family and no person wants to hear. Moreover, it will ensure that they get fast-track support across all social security payments for the first time.

The Bill has been a long time coming, as I have said. We have many frustrations about how it has been handled, which I will come on to, because, as I said, I think it is important to give voice to them, but I thank the staff at the Department for Work and Pensions who have worked on this policy change. In my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on terminal illness, I thank outgoing Ministers for the constructive meetings that we have had over the years on this issue.

For me, the story began in 2017 when I heard the experiences of my terminally ill constituents and what they were going through from colleagues in the incredible Macmillan citizens advice bureau in Inverness. Indeed, it resonates with me still today. It is one of the sharpest memories that I have of any meeting I have ever had in my parliamentary career. I sat in a room with these battle-hardened—and, I have to say, battle-weary—professionals trying to help people at the end of their life, and I am not ashamed to say there were tears in that room as I heard their stories.

I could not believe what I was hearing, and I had sat opposite the Government Benches and heard quite a lot up until then. Even then, I thought that surely there must be some kind of mistake here, that it was simply a policy flaw that only allowed people to claim benefits if they had a diagnosis of six months to live, and that just highlighting this would allow us to move on and get this changed for people because, as I have said, and I will say again, it is inhumane for people. But no, this was a culture of hostility—I have to underline this—in the universal credit regime.

Terminally ill people also lost a lot more than just their payments at that time. Countless terminally ill people were forced to go to work coach meetings, and others had their social security payments stopped entirely. Some of these people died from their illness having not had their support payments, or their payments had not even started. Others had actually had their payments stopped, and were told that they no longer qualified for this.

[Drew Hendry]

As I say, with the new universal credit regime, terminally ill people also lost their right not to find out about their terminal diagnosis. Previously they could choose not to be told of their diagnosis, and that was possible because their advisers completed the forms on their behalf. With universal credit came a change to the forms, confusion at the DWP, a litany of failures and a “computer says no” attitude to problem solving. The system was pretty miserable for terminally people before the universal credit roll-out—no one has ever accused the DWP of being particularly keen to put dignity at the heart of its operations—but after the roll-out it was beyond a nightmare for people.

Back then, I reached out to Marie Curie and, with Members from across the House, set up the all-party parliamentary group on terminal illness. We launched a truly cross-party effort to have the issues arising from the universal credit roll-out resolved, and to get this Government to scrap the arbitrary six-month rule. We joined forces with the all-party parliamentary group on MND and, working with the MND Association and Marie Curie, we launched the Scrap 6 Months campaign.

I think it is important at this point to pay tribute to the former MP Madeleine Moon, who did so much work. I believe she is in the Gallery, which is fantastic. She deserves a lot of credit and praise for the work she did in pushing this forward, and I was delighted to work hand in hand with her, as I promised I would, to try to get this issue highlighted. I must also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who has taken up the mantle with Bills of her own. Indeed, I have had my own ten-minute rule Bill on this subject.

We had two active APPGs, a cross-party approach and amazing campaigners who, with so much grace and humanity, laid everything on the table at evidence session after evidence session. An example is Michelle McCluskey, whose mum died of a cancer tumour, weighing just 3 stone after the DWP stopped her £117 a week benefit. She relayed the pain and suffering this caused her over and over again to the media and in evidence sessions, trying desperately to ensure that nobody else had to endure the same. She, like other amazing campaigners, such as Mark Hughes, who himself has a terminal illness, and others who have campaigned with terminal illnesses, achieved this change today. This change is their victory—this is their moment—and I want to put on record my thanks to each and every one of them, and to the teams at Marie Curie, the MND Association and MND Scotland for all they did to lobby this Government over the past five years to just simply do the right thing.

Back in 2017, when we started to form the campaign, we must have been much less jaded as we seriously thought, given how horrendous the situation was and how easy it was to fix, that this Government would act, but it is now 2022 and, thankfully, the legislation is now going through its remaining stages today. Although I am happy—I am happy this is happening, believe me, because as a result, thousands of people will get the fast-access support they need—and I welcome the Bill, I must highlight the human cost of this Government's inaction. Year after year we produced reports, held evidence sessions, met Minister after Minister, and highlighted real and devastating cases. We were promised

that action would come. I have heard stories of the internal workings, but people who are dying do not really want to hear those. They want action to help them and their families at that time.

We held evidence sessions, and every time we were promised that action would come. Then there was a reshuffle and a new Minister, more promises of action, another new Minister and yet more promises of action, then yet another Minister and so forth. All the while, the Government were telling us that the review was imminent, and all that time we were losing campaigners to their terminal illnesses as each new Minister came and went. That time cost many more lives than we ever foresaw. Back in early 2021, Marie Curie estimated that until that point around 6,000 people had died waiting for this change.

Let us remember what we are talking about. This is not a budgetary change or a big costly exercise; this is about faster access to help for people who are dying from a terminal illness. Five years from when I first raised the issue with the then Secretary of State, five years of campaigning by so many incredible people, and we are here—it is welcome. However, this is a story of a failing Government who need to understand the issues around this. Back when I first raised the issue with a UK Minister, I also raised it with the then Scottish Minister responsible for the roll-out of Scotland's new social security operation, Jeane Freeman MSP. Her response was almost immediate:

“Thank you for highlighting this issue and we will find a way to ensure this never happens with the new Scottish Social Security Department.”

True to her word, for personal independence payments the Scottish Government have taken an open-ended approach to defining terminal illness for financial support. I have yet to have one complaint in my inbox that people are not getting that support, so I do not see the difficulties that have been highlighted. The Scottish Government chose to start from a place of putting those people and their needs first, and to find a way to make the system work while putting dignity and respect at the heart of the process. That is in sharp contrast to this Parliament, where the internal struggles of the Tory party have seen us reach our fifth Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions in five years, and a hostile approach that is not limited to the Home Office but reverberates across Departments.

Justin Tomlinson: I absolutely understand the good intentions behind what the hon. Gentleman sets out, but the fundamental flaw is that it relies on people who are terminally ill knowing about the support, and how to navigate what is now a complex situation in Scotland. Under our rules, the 12-month rule, support can be automatically highlighted by GPs at the same time as palliative care. Not only is that a better system, but people who would otherwise unknowingly miss that support will get it. Will he lobby the Scottish Government to listen to the stakeholders he has praised and mirror what we are doing?

Drew Hendry: I thank the former Minister for his intervention, and I would say two things. First, the principle in Scotland was to ensure that it was not a DWP operative or contracted-out person who made the decision, but clinicians and health professionals. This is

not a particularly party political issue, but I said that I would give a voice to the frustrations of people of all political persuasion, and none, who have struggled and suffered through this process, and that is what I am doing. I will always work to try to get a problem ironed out, should a problem exist, but I am not faced with the same content in my mailbag that I had in previous years due to difficulties with the DWP.

Like other Departments, the DWP is barely functioning at the moment, so there is real work for the new Secretary of State and Minister to get into. Staff from offices across the Chamber cannot get answers for our constituents, and the situation is even worse for colleagues in local citizens advice bureaux. People living with terminal illness face housing and fuel poverty on top of the rising costs that come with having to live with a chronic health condition: they have to stay in and heat their houses because they have to be as well as possible in those houses. People living with terminal illness face many ongoing issues, and they, like millions of households across the nations of the UK, are being failed if that is not heard. The Government must listen to those demands to treat dying people with dignity and respect and ensure that more people do not die stressful deaths in poverty due to inaction.

3.20 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I join in congratulating Ministers and the Secretary of State on their new appointments. I do not think that anybody wants to delay the legislation further for the 30,000 to 60,000 people who will benefit from the change, so I will confine my remarks to Second Reading.

It is a pleasure, as ever, to speak in support of the Bill, which represents an important milestone in the long struggle to improve how our benefits system treats the terminally ill. That we are debating this vital legislation in Government time is not an accident but the result of years of dogged work by organisations such as the Motor Neurone Disease Association and Marie Curie, both of which were of huge support to me when I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on the subject in 2020. It is also, as others have said, testament to many local volunteers who support those organisations' work in their communities. On that note, I thank Judith Rice and the very active south-east Wales branch of the MND Association that brought the issue to my attention and has continued to lobby for change.

Like the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), I pay tribute to campaigners across the country including Mark Hughes and Michelle McCluskey. He is quite right that this is their victory, along with those organisations. I also pay tribute to my very good friend Madeleine Moon, the former Member for Bridgend, who I see is in the Gallery. I am glad that she is here to see our proceedings. Her campaigning work on this and her zeal was born out of her own tragic loss. She was particularly dedicated to the cause. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness, did a lot of good work in this area by calling out the systematic injustices faced by those living with terminal illness. I thank Mark Jackson from Marie Curie as well as Alison Railton and Lana Ghafoor, both formerly of the MND Association, who were of great help to both the all-party parliamentary group and to me on the ten-minute rule Bill.

I also thank the Government for listening. While I and others will be critical of the delays in getting legislation to the Table over the last two or more years, I am grateful that we are here today and that Ministers have recognised the broad cross-party support for this change. I thank the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). There was dogged campaigning on this issue, but he did listen and move things forward. Today, he has had the chance to set out some of the complexities, which will be on the record.

As others have outlined, the Bill will bring an end to the hated six-month rule: a cruel stipulation that forced many of the most vulnerable people in our society to prove that they had six months or less to live to receive benefits under those special rules. The six-month rule was always illogical for those living with complex and unpredictable terminal illnesses such as motor neurone disease, given that an exact prognosis of life expectancy within a half-year window is often impossible. It is a disgrace that so many households were pushed through that inhumane bureaucratic hoop at a time of unimaginable pain and worry.

Thankfully, as others have said, the six-month rule has already been removed from the special rules claims for ESA and universal credit, and the Bill will ensure that the same is true for PIP, attendance allowance and DLA. It is crucial that the Bill has a swift passage onto the statute book. For that reason, colleagues in the Lords ensured that it passed through the other place unamended. On behalf of terminally ill people in my constituency and those across the country who simply cannot afford to wait any longer, I support a similar course of action here. The six-month rule may soon be consigned to history, but there is still so much more to do to ensure that terminally ill people are afforded the dignity and respect they deserve from our social security system. I want to speak to some of those connected, ongoing injustices today.

The three-year award duration rule is still in place, forcing terminally ill people to reapply for their benefits if they live for longer than three years. The Motor Neurone Disease Association has pointed to cases where people who outlived their prognosis but were extremely ill—completely paralysed, ventilated or unable to speak—received letters telling them their benefits would stop unless they made a new claim. As with the six-month rule, that is not just cruel but illogical. For example, an applicant can receive a 10-year personal independence payment award with only a “light touch review” after a decade of having a severe or lifelong disability, but if they have a terminal illness they might be made to make a full reapplication after just three years. That makes no sense.

Another issue to look at going forward will be the 12-month rule, which has replaced its six-month predecessor. While it is clear that the DWP wanted to ensure that some timebound definition for the special rules remained in place, it is important that Ministers commit to reviewing the impact of the change to see if it is having the desired effect, or whether significant numbers of terminally ill people are still being disadvantaged. The Government must be diligent in monitoring that and keep all options on the table for the future, including looking at whether a timebound model is more appropriate than a timescale-free approach, such as the one adopted in Scotland. I

[Jessica Morden]

hope the Minister can speak a bit more to that later on and at the very least commit to a regular evaluation of the new system.

It is important to note that the Bill will not be enough in itself to protect dying people from falling into poverty. As Marie Curie pointed out—this was also raised by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) at business questions—the Bill covers access to benefits but not the adequacy of those benefits. Research shows they are all too often inadequate in meeting the impact on finances caused by the additional costs and loss of income that follow a terminal diagnosis. Marie Curie highlighted the cumulative impact of the benefits cap over the last 12 years, which has meant that in real terms working-age benefits are now less generous than they were under the last Labour Government. Benefit rates had fallen behind inflation over the last decade, even before the current cost of living crisis. Marie Curie's research shows that 90,000 people die in poverty each year in the UK, with those of working age twice as likely to fall into poverty at the end of life. That number is only likely to have gone up over the last eight months, with household bills, the price of food and other essentials going up and benefit rates not rising to meet the shortfall. We face the prospect of more terminally ill people falling into poverty.

I urge the Government to engage with Marie Curie on its “Dying In Poverty” campaign, which had its launch yesterday in Parliament. The campaign's aim is to ensure that everybody with a terminal illness is able to access the financial support they need to cope with the cost of housing, energy, childcare and disability at the end of their life. That is really important. It includes looking at proposals to ensure that terminally ill people of working age are able to access their state pension early, and, in the immediate short term, at targeted support on soaring energy bills for terminally ill people given their particular vulnerability to fuel poverty.

This afternoon is one of the rare occasions when the whole House is united in our determination to improve how our social security system treats some of the most vulnerable people in our society. That is important, and this legislation is really important. What is doubly critical, however, is that the changes represent a starting point rather than a full stop. We must do more and strengthen our resolve to ensure that none of our constituents or loved ones ever face the indignity of spending their final months worrying about whether they will have enough money to make it through the week. Until the wonderful day that cures are found for the wretched terminal illnesses that blight so many lives, our priority should be to ensure that our welfare system affords every dying person the dignity, decency and respect they deserve. It cuts to the core of what we want our social security system to be and what we want our country to stand for, but I am thankful today for this legislation.

3.29 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Like other Members, I am keeping the Queen and her family in my thoughts and prayers at this time.

It is always refreshing when consensus breaks out in the House, and that has, more or less, been demonstrated this afternoon. I pay tribute to the Members who have

spoken who have campaigned on this issue for considerably longer than I have—for many years. We will almost certainly all have constituents who stand to benefit almost immediately once the Bill is implemented. Indeed, many of us will have friends and family, in our constituencies or elsewhere, who will feel the positive impact.

As a number of Members have noted, the direct application of the Bill in Scotland will be partial, because the disability living allowance and the personal independence payment have been replaced by the child and adult disability payment schemes respectively. In due course, the attendance allowance will be replaced by the pension age disability payment.

The Scottish Government have taken a distinct approach by placing dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of social security, which they recognise as a human right. They think that it is not about the beneficence of the state but is something that people are inherently entitled to, so that they can live an adequate and humane life. Therefore, when these payments are made available to people in Scotland who have received a diagnosis of a terminal illness, there will not be a specific time limit. Social security becomes available if a clinician determines that their patient has

“a progressive disease that can reasonably be expected to cause the individual's death.”

The UK Government will at some point have to review the implementation and effectiveness of the Bill after it has been enacted—I hope to have a bit more to say about that in Committee—and when that time comes, they should look carefully at the experience and approach being taken in Scotland and at whether it is working.

The overall costs of the Bill to Government—whether in Scotland or the UK—are not exorbitant, but the difference that will be made to the lives of those in receipt of benefit will be significant. The 12-month limit, instead of a six-month limit, will remove uncertainty in the most difficult of circumstances and provide quicker and easier access to support at a time when it is needed most. That will be true across the spectrum, no matter the age of the individual or the shape of the household. It does seem, however, that the changes will be particularly welcomed by people and families of working age, who often feel the impact of a terminal diagnosis particularly hard.

As others have said, Marie Curie is one of a number of organisations who have campaigned for many years for the Bill to be introduced. All those groups should be congratulated. Marie Curie research shows that 90,000 people die in poverty every year in the UK. One in four terminally ill people of working age spend the last year of their lives in poverty, so the quicker and easier that it is to access these benefits, and the earlier that that can be done in the diagnostic and clinical journey, the better. With a terminal diagnosis, time becomes even more precious, and that time should not be frittered away because of money worries or state-imposed bureaucracy.

The Marie Curie “Dying in poverty” report contains some powerful and moving testimony from people and families around the UK who are struggling to make ends meet while dealing with a terminal illness. One of those who shared their experiences is Melanie, who, as well as being a constituent of my hon. Friend the

Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), is a close personal friend of mine. I have known her husband, Tom, since we were the same age as their wee boy is today—he is also my godson—and I had the immense privilege of being the best man at their wedding earlier this year.

Mel spoke to the BBC about how radically their lives have changed since she was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer last year. They are experiencing what many families and households experience when one of their number becomes terminally ill. The chances are that the person with the illness stops working and at some point begins to lose contractual or statutory entitlements to sick pay. However, with reduced mobility and greater support needs, their partner finds that they, too, need time off work and perhaps a reduction in hours, which, in turn, means a further reduction of income. That is at a point when costs and outgoings begin to increase—for adaptations to the house, more specialised food or drink and more frequent trips to the hospital—and that is exactly what has happened to Mel, Tom and their family.

When Mel gave her testimony to Marie Curie and the BBC, she said it was not because they were special—although they are very, very special indeed to me—but because what they are experiencing is typical. Cancer support forums and other terminal illness support groups are full of such stories, and we have heard others from across the House. For thousands of families like them across the country, the situation this winter is not going to get any easier. Skyrocketing energy prices will lead to exceptionally difficult choices, even with the support packages announced today. “Heat or eat” is a phrase that we hear so many times in this Chamber, but that is the almost impossible choice facing people with a terminal illness. Warmth and good nutrition are essential if medical treatments are to have any chance of prolonging or improving quality of life and if palliative care and pain medication are to have any kind of impact. It is not just about the costs of food and fuel; energy-efficiency measures such as a new boiler, a window or wall insulation are rarely completely cost-free. That means more up-front capital expense at a time when savings are dwindling, if they still exist.

The last time Mel and I spoke about the Bill, she made an important point. The changes that we are debating today and the further changes that Marie Curie and others are calling for are not specifically about tackling the wider cost of living crisis that is affecting the country today. Even if inflation were low and energy prices were stable, research shows that a terminal diagnosis could cost a household as much as £12,000 to £16,000 per year. People need support. People are entitled to support to help them to get through these most difficult of times, focus on their life, their family and their loved ones, make memories and savour the moments while they can. They should not have to worry about whether they can keep their houses warm or fill up the tank to drive to hospital for treatment.

Urgent action must be taken to support everyone who is feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis, including those who are diagnosed with a terminal illness, but that needs to happen above and beyond the provisions of the Bill. For working-age households in particular, a terminal diagnosis often creates its own cost of living crisis or, worse, cost of dying crisis. Basic

human dignity should mean that those who can no longer be an active part of the workforce and who are faced with the end of their life are adequately supported to spend what remains of their time as comfortably as they can.

The Marie Curie report makes some recommendations for further steps, such as bringing forward eligibility for the state pension. We might be able to discuss that point in a little more detail in Committee, but for now I think we need to welcome the consensus for the Bill's Second Reading. For some families, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said, it has come too late. It has taken years of campaigning to bring about a change that will cost very little to the Government but that might make all the difference to those who will benefit.

Passing the Bill today will not be job done. Its provisions must be kept under review and benchmarked against better or best practice in Scotland or elsewhere. If individuals and families, like my friends, who want to make the most of their time together after a terminal diagnosis think that further, different or more support is needed, they should be listened to and it should be provided.

3.37 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): May I welcome the new Secretary of State, who is not in her place, and the new Minister of State? This is a short but important and welcome Bill that has rightly been approached in a spirit of consensus and in a largely non-partisan manner. Hon. Members on both sides of the House and former Members have campaigned hard over many years to get us to this point; it may feel inevitable now that we have reached it, but I know that it does not feel inevitable while people are campaigning for it. The former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), played his part as well. All credit must be paid to everybody who has brought us to this point, including the charities and campaigning organisations that have done so much work and have brought the evidence to the Government for making the change.

All Members who have debated the Bill this afternoon or in the other House agree that the experience for people with a terminal illness is almost inevitably one of financial worry as a result of lost earnings and additional costs. At the very time when they need the least stress in their life, financial worries all too frequently add not just to their own stress but to that of their loved ones and those who care for them. The last thing that people with a serious illness or a terminal condition need is to go through the worry of making benefit applications and amassing evidence. The fewer cliff edges in their path, the better. We need to do everything we can to reduce the stresses for people who are already living with unimaginable stress. The Bill is welcome because it will do that. It will relieve stress for many, many people for a considerable period.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) made clear in opening this short debate, it is a shame that it has taken us three years to proceed from the start of the evaluation of the special rules for terminal illness to where we are now, but we are none the less relieved that we are passing legislation, and

[Ms Karen Buck]

doing so with everyone's support. We want these changes to proceed with all speed. However, there are one or two areas in which we have sought additional assurances; no doubt they will be referred to in Committee as well.

First, can we be assured that as we pass from the general into the specific—the opening up of entitlement to potentially tens of thousands of individuals—no further barriers will be put in the way of claimants, and the system will have the capacity to process applications swiftly and compassionately? Perhaps during the Bill's further stages the Minister will be able to say a bit little more about what capacity can be guaranteed in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that that will be possible.

Secondly, we have heard a little about the need for us to monitor the potential for different approaches as the Bill proceeds. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), there will still be a great deal to do once the six-month rule has been consigned to history. It is important for us at least to keep an open mind as we monitor the implications of these changes, in view of the inevitable trade-offs. We must ensure that a time limit which has the benefit of administrative simplicity does not exclude the exceptional needs of people with an illness, because health conditions are so imprecise and the evaluation of the medical profession is inevitably precise. The circumstances of those whose condition takes them just over a period of qualification should be considered flexibly and compassionately. A more open-ended approach may be more complex, but it can ensure that individuals are treated in a more dignified and compassionate manner.

Obviously we have no intention of delaying the Bill's progress. However, we seek assurances from the Minister that these issues will be considered further, that the impact will be closely monitored, and that attention will be paid to the merits of an alternative approach. That said, I hope that we can now move very quickly to complete the passage of the Bill.

3.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Victoria Prentis): The thoughts and prayers of the House and, indeed, the whole nation are obviously with those in Balmoral at the moment.

It is nevertheless a great honour to debate this extremely important—if quite short—Bill, and to hear, from all parts of the Chamber, very personal stories and a passionate desire for us to do what we can to make the welfare system better for those who are nearing the end of their lives. Like so many others, I myself have buried both my child and my mother, and I strongly believe that we must do everything we can to help people to achieve the best possible death. This Bill is part of that passion.

I want to pay tribute to some of the people who share the passion. We have heard from some of them this afternoon, and we have heard from others who are no longer in this place. I should include in that list the former Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye, who felt very firmly that she wanted to initiate and engage with such a Bill. We heard a passionate speech from my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for

North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). He has done a marvellous job for years, and indeed this afternoon, when he responded to many of the points to which I would otherwise have had to respond, as the Minister who has been in place for only hours, not days.

We have also heard about the former Member of Parliament for Bridgend, and it is such a pleasure to see her in the Public Gallery this afternoon to witness the conclusion of many years of work and passion. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has carried on that work in this place, and it was good to hear from her as well. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), the Scottish National party spokesman and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on terminal illness, has also worked very hard on issues relating to end-of-life care. It is good to feel consensus this afternoon, and I am really pleased to bring the Bill to this stage, although I feel slightly embarrassed, as others have been working in the area for so long.

I will touch very briefly on the questions that were asked in the course of this very short debate. They relate partly to time. It is important to get this right, and we had to consult. I say this as a new Minister: it is really important that we listen to both patients and clinicians. That always takes time. We have had a global pandemic in that time, but I agree that it is of course important for those who are dying that we roll out the rest of the policy as soon as possible. We are very much hoping that measures can be put in place and operational by April of next year.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) was kind enough to mention turnaround times. As a very new member of the Department, I am proud of the turnaround times. The fast-track approach means that there is a three-day average turnaround time in the special department that deals with the special rules. I think that is fantastic, and should reassure those across the House who are concerned about whether the system will have the capacity for these very special claims for people who are nearing the end of their lives. If I may use the words of the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and change them a bit, I feel that there is an “computer says yes” attitude in that section of the Department. That is right and proper, and I will do all I can to ensure that that is maintained, and, yes, we will monitor the progress of the policy extremely carefully and it is right that we do that.

It is important that we listen to clinicians on the time limit. This is a difficult area. It is difficult for clinicians to have these conversations with patients and families, and it is difficult for them to know everything about the progress of a disease. As the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, it is sometimes almost impossible to tell.

Justin Tomlinson: On the specific point about clinicians, it is also about striking a balance. Clinicians do not want to be an extension of the DWP or the social security system. It was therefore also important to piggyback on existing work rather than creating arbitrary work. Clinicians have enough pressures, and they made that crystal clear in the engagement we had with them.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend puts it much better than I can, and I thank him warmly for his engagement. The consultation was extensive and almost 1,000 clinicians were able to share their views. I would also like to

reassure the House that we have a robust system in place to keep checking in to make sure that the system works in the best way it possibly can.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I do not know whether my hon. Friend would like to say a further word about the attitude of the DWP staff. I served on the Work and Pensions Committee for many years, as did the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). I think the staff want to get the money out of the door, and if there is clarity in the rules that helps. I welcome the Bill, but I wanted to make that point about the staff, who are, I think, good-hearted and who want to do the job well.

Victoria Prentis: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an excellent point. In my interactions with DWP staff as a constituency MP, I have been blown away by their determination to help those we serve. I am sure that that accords with his experience.

In conclusion, the Bill will ensure that thousands more people who are at the end of their lives can get faster access to three disability benefits. It will change eligibility so that those expected to live for 12 months or less will be able to access support at an earlier stage. The changes will ensure a consistent end-of-life definition across health and welfare services and will introduce—this is very important, as clinicians begged for it—easily understood criteria that should lead to really effective implementation and wide take-up. The Government are committed to improving the benefit system so that people nearing the end of their lives will have a system that works, one that gives those who are affected the support they need when they need it and one that clinicians, charities and families can engage in with confidence.

I put on record my thanks to the individuals, charities, clinical groups and others who have supported the Department since the evaluation of how the benefits system supports people was launched in 2019, and I recognise the valuable work that has been done. The Department is absolutely committed to continuing to engage with them as the changes in this Bill are rolled out and implemented. This is only a small Bill, but it is one that will provide thousands more people with the valuable support they and their families need at what is a very difficult time, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Further proceedings on the Bill stood postponed (Order, this day).

SOCIAL SECURITY (SPECIAL RULES FOR END OF LIFE) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Sir David Evennett.)

Question agreed to.

Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [Lords]

Proceedings resumed (Order, this day)

Considered in Committee

[DAME ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Just before we begin proceedings in Committee, may I add to the many statements that have been made this afternoon? The whole House, my constituents in Epping Forest and, indeed, everyone throughout the country is thinking of Her Majesty and the royal family. Our hearts go out to them.

Clause 1

RULES TO APPLY WHERE DEATH EXPECTED WITHIN
12 MONTHS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government amendment 1.

Clause 2 stand part.

New clause 1—*Impact and policy review*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must conduct a review of the effectiveness of this Act.

(2) Before commencing the review, the Secretary of State must consult the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers or the Northern Ireland department on the terms of reference for the review and on the appointment of a person to conduct the review.

(3) The review must consider the findings from the evaluation of the special rules for terminal illness process published by the Department for Work and Pensions in July 2021.

(4) The review must in particular take into account the impact of this Act on—

- (a) the quality of life and experience of poverty of the recipients of the relevant benefits,
- (b) the well-being of carers and dependants of the recipients of the relevant benefits,
- (c) the clinical care of the recipients of the relevant benefits, and
- (d) the level of take-up of the relevant benefits.

(5) The review may consider and make recommendations for further provision in relation to financial support for people approaching the end of their life (where death can reasonably be expected within the next 12 months), such as bringing forward the date of eligibility for an individual's state pension to align with the date from when the special rules apply to that individual.

(6) The final report of the review must take account of any contribution made to the review by or on behalf of the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers or the Northern Ireland department.

(7) The Secretary of State must lay a report of the review carried out under this section before both Houses of Parliament no later than 18 months after the date on which this Act is passed.”

This new clause would require the Government to conduct and lay before Parliament a review of the effectiveness and impact of the Act, with requirements to consult Scottish and Welsh ministers and the Northern Ireland Department.

3.52 pm

Victoria Prentis: I understand that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) does not intend to press new clause 1, yet it raises the significant issue of renewing the policy, so I will address it.

The Government introduced this Bill following extensive engagement with clinicians, patient groups and others on the support provided to those whose life is coming to an end. As the Committee knows, this engagement began in 2019. The Bill's change to extend eligibility under the special rules from six months to 12 months was strongly supported during the evaluation. There was significant support from clinicians for a 12-month approach because they feel it is important to align the definition of "end of life" in the benefits system with the definition used in the NHS.

The DWP has engaged extensively with the devolved Administrations on the changes proposed in this Bill. In particular, the Department is in close contact with the Scottish Government to ensure that Scottish people who are nearing the end of their life and looking to access benefits through the special rules are supported by the DWP for reserved benefits, and by the Scottish Government as they continue to roll out their replacement disability benefits. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Glasgow North was here to hear the Secretary of State's answer on the Department's engagement with the Scottish Government. As a very new Minister, it is probably better that I defer to her experience of this matter. I very much agree with what she said a little earlier.

The Department also worked closely with the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland during the evaluation to ensure that the experience of people nearing the end of their lives in Northern Ireland was properly captured. The Department for Communities has already implemented the 12-month change, and both Departments continue to work together to ensure that the principle of parity is maintained across both social security systems.

We anticipate that the changes made by this Bill, which will provide thousands more people with vital financial support, will help improve the quality of the very precious time at the end of life. The changes will mean that people in that situation, and by extension their families and carers, can worry a little less about money. In order to help raise awareness of these changes and encourage take-up, we will continue to engage widely. We hope that wider groups—clinical groups and charities—can help us to communicate to those who meet the new definition to make a claim under the special rules. We will monitor the effect of these changes carefully, and we will use our existing network and do some more proactive engagement, too. We will watch with interest as the different approach taken by the Scottish Government is fully rolled out, and I am very committed, as is my Secretary of State, to maintaining strong links with the Scottish Government.

Justin Tomlinson: Will the Minister also formally write to her Scottish counterparts and mirror the request, asking that they formally review their efforts and consider the weight of evidence that supports our changes to seek parity?

Victoria Prentis: That sounds like a very sensible suggestion from the former Minister, and if I am charged with this policy area when departmental briefs are fully

worked out, I will ensure that I keep up a close dialogue with the Scottish Government on how the two systems are working, both separately and together.

We will also continue to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to assess the impact of these changes on the end of life care provided by the health and social care system as a whole. If at any time a more comprehensive evaluation of the policy is required, we will, of course, commission one, as we did in 2019. The Government want to do all they can to alleviate the pressures on those nearing the end of their lives, and on their families. Our priority is providing people with financial support quickly and compassionately. We are determined to ensure that people have certainty about when they can expect to receive their state pension and that the state pension system is fair to future generations. I hope that this answer has helped to address some of the questions that the hon. Member for Glasgow North may have had, and I understand that he does not intend to press his amendment.

Matt Rodda: May I support and associate myself with the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition about how we are thinking about the royal family at this difficult time?

I have already outlined our support for this Bill and highlighted several areas in which I believe the House seeks further clarification. I thank the Minister for her responses on some of those, and I look forward to further clarification. As we consider the next stage of the Bill, I would like to share a few case studies from people whose lives have been impacted by the rules, so that we can consider this issue more fully. I also wish to thank Marie Curie for highlighting these cases.

The first case is that of Lorraine Cox from Enniskillen in Northern Ireland. When Lorraine was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2018, she applied for personal independence payment to help mitigate the impact the disease was having on her daily life. Sadly, to her shock, her claim was declined. Lorraine took her case to judicial review and it became influential in convincing the Department for Work and Pensions to change the law through this Bill. Sadly, Lorraine passed away in July 2022, while the Bill was still awaiting its passage through the Commons. Lorraine spoke to Marie Curie in 2019 about her experiences, and I will share some of her words with you now.

Lorraine said:

"From the moment I started the application process, I felt like I wasn't being taken seriously. Just because I don't look ill—I still wear make-up and dress well every day—that doesn't mean that I'm less entitled. People don't realise the impact MND can have on your life. It's the little everyday things that become a struggle.

I've completely lost the feeling in my left hand. I can't make my own bed, my children help me get dressed, I have a cleaner, I can't cook the way I used to. My balance is off, and I can now feel my foot starting to go too."

As part of her PIP application, Lorraine had a face-to-face consultation with a disability assessor. It was after this consultation that she was told her application had been declined. She said:

"I felt so angry when I was assessed as not fitting the criteria. It's very disheartening and I just don't understand why it has to be so difficult. Work is very important to me as it gives me some independence and allows me to focus on something else. It's a bit of escapism from my condition."

4 pm

Lorraine went on to say:

“But I want to reduce my hours next year, so I can spend more time with my kids. As I don’t have long, I want to spend quality time making memories. Looking ahead is the hardest part. I’ve started to have nightmares about my kids, a sense of loss or them being taken away from me. They have a wonderful father, but it’s not the same as having a mummy.

I’m a very determined person and I’m not going to give up. It has become a matter of principle, even above the money. I shouldn’t have to spend my time fighting for support. It’s exhausting. Situations like this really make you realise what’s important in life and I’m very lucky that I have a good support network around me.

I felt I had to speak out about my situation as I don’t want others to have to face the same struggles at such a difficult time.”

The second case I would like to share is that of Victor Carver. Victor has terminal cancer and lost his job during the coronavirus pandemic. He says:

“I haven’t got enough money, really, to live. I often borrow from loan sharks, for which you can borrow £20, pay back £40—that sort of thing. I’ve had days where I’ve got no food in my cupboard.

I am broke and I don’t have an overdraft. I don’t have savings anywhere. So, when it’s gone it’s gone.

As soon as I got made redundant, my landlord, who also knew of my circumstances, evicted me. He served a Section 21, a no-fault eviction on me. I wasn’t in arrears. During that time, I only got Housing Allowance. My rent was £1,150, the Local Housing Allowance is £700 or £697, so I was always going to be behind on my rent.”

He says that during that period, he got into difficulty with his rent payments.

Victor goes on:

“My landlord knew I was terminally ill, he knew Covid had hit. Then he found out I was being made redundant, and knew I couldn’t pay my rent, probably. The rest is history. But, because of my circumstances and because of the eviction bans, it took him nearly until September last year to get me out. But by the time I did go out, obviously I was quite a lot behind in arrears.

I ended up homeless, living in an old car. Eventually I got my PIP and my Motability. I get the maximum allowance. And it’s an indefinite payment, because of my illness. So, it can never be challenged. But I had to go to court for this. The DWP took it all the way and I only got awarded it last November.

My PIP was a massively backdated payment. For about £5,000 or something when it came in. But to be honest, I didn’t even notice, it was gone within a week.”

He says that he used it to pay off all the debts he had incurred. He then bought a caravan to live in while he was homeless. He says:

“The hole gets deeper and deeper and deeper. So, you’re borrowing off one loan shark to pay back another. You’re literally robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

I hope you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that those testimonies illustrate the need for this legislation.

Patrick Grady: As others have said, there is a consensus across the House and I do not intend to do anything to disrupt that with new clause 1. It is probing by nature and the probing has taken place, because the Minister has responded in quite some detail, for which I am grateful, on some of what it was trying to achieve. It is worth spelling that out for the record, even if the exchange is a bit back to front as a result.

We heard on Second Reading that even with the Bill, thousands of households will continue to experience poverty as a result of a terminal illness diagnosis. The

Government should therefore be prepared to keep the impact of the changes under review, which is what new clause 1 would require. In doing so, they should look at practice elsewhere, which would obviously include the devolved Administrations. That is why that specific requirement is in the new clause. The Scottish Government have decided to take a different approach—a distinct human rights-based approach—to social security. In this specific context, there is the deliberate lack of a time limit on the definition of terminal illness, and the qualification for payments is determined by a clinician, rather than by Government bureaucracy.

Justin Tomlinson: To be crystal clear, both systems have a clinical professional making the decision—there is no difference. Furthermore, there is no additional money in either our system or Scotland’s system. It is just about how quickly a person can access the fast-track service.

Patrick Grady: That is quite helpful. In the spirit of consensus, I think I would say that this is not job done. That is what I was trying to achieve with my amendment. The passing of the Bill is not where the Government tick a box and everyone pats themselves on the back and goes away. We will have to keep the impact of this under review. Yes, people both north and south of the border will have to look at how things are panning out and come back to it. That is the point that we are trying to make. The amendment provided the opportunity for that point to be made on Second Reading.

Subsections 4 and 5 urge us to consider what wider support might be available, even once people are able to access the additional benefits available through the Bill. That is why Marie Curie and others are calling for the state pension to be paid to anyone who is dying of a terminal illness regardless of their age. Working age social security payments, such as universal credit and employment and support allowance, are just that—they are security payments for when work is not possible or available for whatever reason. A pension is a contributory system. It is a contract. It has been paid into, at least in theory—that might not be how the state pension works in practice, but that is the theory behind it. Many private pensions will pay out, or have the option to be paid out, when a terminal diagnosis has been made, so allowing the same access to the state pension would be a further significant step forward in ensuring that people of working age who are terminally ill can spend their remaining time with some certainty and comfort.

The Government must agree that, in the 21st century in the UK, nobody should have to die in poverty. That is why this is a probing amendment. I am grateful for the pre-emptive response from the Minister and that she has taken this in the spirit in which it has been tabled. I hope that she will confirm that the impact of the Bill will be kept under review, that the Department will work with and learn from the experience of Scotland and elsewhere, and that, when and if more support is required for people, such as access to the state pension, it will be provided.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1, accordingly, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Government amendment made: 1, page 2, line 1, leave out subsection (6).

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

4.8 pm

Victoria Prentis: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a great pleasure to be speaking on Third Reading. As we have heard this afternoon, the Bill will ensure that more people in their final year of life can access the benefits they need in a fast and simple way. It will result in a consistent end-of-life definition being used across health and welfare services in England and Wales. I thank all those who have prioritised the passage of the Bill through the House. I would also like to thank the House authorities, and the Bill team, which has had to cope with an extremely new Minister—in post this morning—and brief her thoroughly about the Bill. I also wish to thank previous Ministers in my role who have done all they can to take the Bill forward. Above all, I think the whole House would like to thank the charities and campaigners, including Marie Curie, Macmillan, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and others who have worked so hard for this moment.

4.10 pm

Matt Rodda: I thank the Minister for her remarks as well as all the hon. Members who have taken part today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden); the former Minister the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson); the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady); the Chair of the Select Committee and others. I, too, pay tribute to the charities, organisations, trade unions and individuals who have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that these changes are introduced.

As we have already heard, congratulations in particular go to Marie Curie and the MND Association for their Scrap 6 Months campaign. I also pay tribute to all the individuals impacted by this, their families and carers.

This is a short Bill, but it will have a huge impact on many people's lives at an incredibly stressful time. It is a privilege to play a part in the process of making people's final months somewhat easier than they might otherwise have been. We chose not to table any amendments to the Bill even though I would have welcomed the opportunity to explore further some of the issues highlighted on Second Reading. It is imperative that we get the Bill on to the statute book as soon as possible so that people can start to benefit from the amended definition of end of life. As things stand, fast-track access to universal credit and ESA is available for those with 12 months to live, while PIP, DLA and attendance allowance are only available for those deemed to have six months to live. That is understandably causing confusion, and everything must be brought into line as quickly as possible.

I shall end by reiterating two very important points. First, will the Minister consider following the Scottish Government in taking a more open-ended approach,

rather than insisting that awards made under the special rules can last for only three years? Will she commit to evaluating the relative effectiveness of the two different approaches in the coming months?

Secondly, I return to my point about seeking reassurances about how the Department will ensure that it has the capacity to maintain a truly fast turnaround time for applications made under the special rules. Will it monitor how many people receive their claims before they die? Will it also evaluate how well information is being filtered down to clinicians and others who need it so that they find the process easy to navigate.

Once again, I thank the Minister and colleagues for their thoughtful contributions. The Bill has our full support.

4.12 pm

Drew Hendry: I am also keen for the Bill to make progress as quickly as possible. Our thanks should go to the people who have been campaigning for this change, including the fabulous organisations such as Marie Curie, Macmillan and Citizens Advice; MND and MND Scotland, which have done so much work; and individual campaigners who have told their stories time and again, some at great personal cost.

I praise the probing amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), because it is important that such matters are considered. I hope, from the Minister's tone today, that she will take away some of the comments that have been made so that lessons can be learned from what has happened to people. Terminally ill people will face increased pressures in the coming months and years, and it is vital that services can be streamlined for them. Ministerial churn should not slow the process in the future and work should be done to ensure that protection.

It has been suggested that the Scottish Government need to do further work. I am certain that the Minister, Ben Macpherson, will be delighted to consider how things can be streamlined further in the interests of fairness and dignity for those people at the heart of the system. I am sure that the Minister will find an open door there.

As I said right at the beginning, this is a welcome step that will help people. It is a victory for the campaigners, so well done to them. They will not stop, and they should not stop, until they get the things they need for the people affected and their families.

4.14 pm

Justin Tomlinson: To seek to take advantage of the consensus, as part of the review I appeal to the Minister that, as set out in the Green Paper, the next stage is to extend and review the severe conditions criteria, so that those who sadly have terminal degenerative conditions, but would not necessarily be at that 12-month point, find a much simpler and swifter process to enter in to the various elements of support. That would both be good for the claimant and relieve pressure on a system that has a huge amount of demand on it, which would then speed up the process for others so that it could be faster than the current 16 weeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Ordered,

That Deidre Brock be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Pete Wishart in pursuance of section 1(2)(d) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended.
—(*Mr Peter Bone.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am just prevaricating for a moment. A point of order would be very helpful.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is obviously important that hon. Members who have an Adjournment debate, for example, are in the Chamber when they ought to be. However, when business collapses because of the outbreak of consensus that we saw in the House and the determination of hon. Members to ensure that the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [*Lords*] proceeded as quickly as possible and could get on to the statute book, perhaps it is a little bit surprising. I think we should be grateful to hon. Members that we were able to achieve that consensus. I put on record, as I did not get a chance to, how well the Minister did in responding to my specific amendment, given that she was brand new, and I commend the work of her officials, who have to do that little bit of extra work when amendments come in from Back Benchers. We should be grateful for that consensus, even if it takes a few of us by surprise.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has been most eloquent and helpful to the House in his point of order. It is not really a matter for the Chair, but if I were to express an opinion, it would be that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) owes the hon. Gentleman a double Glenmorangie.

Free School Meals and Child Poverty

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

4.18 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): On behalf of the constituents of Liverpool, Riverside, I extend my heartfelt wishes to the Queen and the royal family and wish her a speedy recovery.

I am grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate on free school meals and tackling child poverty. This is a very urgent and timely call to action for the new Prime Minister, calling for the roll-out of universal free school meals. I believe no issue is more important than making sure that no child goes hungry.

I congratulate the Minister on her new position and the new Education Secretary—the fifth we have had this year. I hope the Minister is serious about tackling the very real poverty crisis that has exploded over the past 12 years of Tory rule. We know it is likely to get worse over the coming months, which will be the hardest winter for thousands of children growing up in poverty.

When I applied for this debate before the summer recess, I had intended to focus on how the benefits of investing in universal free school meals would help to reverse the long-standing and ever-deepening inequalities in health and educational attainment between poorer pupils and their more affluent peers. But the economic landscape has worsened significantly. Everything is going up except incomes for the worst-off. The cost of living crisis is set to plunge two thirds of the country into fuel poverty and three quarters of a million children into poverty. The call for universal free school meals has now become much more urgent.

If the new Prime Minister is to prevent children from freezing and starving this winter, rolling out universal free school meals must be a key cornerstone of any emergency support plan. Instead of a real living wage and a welfare system that supports people out of poverty, we have a crisis of insecure work and poverty pay, and a welfare system that drives people into destitution. Make no bones about it, we are facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Inflation and interest rates are going up, while the pound is plunging and a record rise in food prices is pushing millions more into food insecurity.

As pupils head back to school this week, nearly a quarter will be eligible for free school meals. That number has risen by nearly 50% since 2019 and is rising every single day. It is a clear indication of the explosion in child poverty that this Government have contributed to during the last 12 years of austerity. We have seen attacks on the welfare system and under-resourcing of the public sector. School pupils have already suffered setbacks during the pandemic, with inequalities in educational attainment widening, particularly between the north and the south. In my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside, 11 children in every class of 30 were already living in poverty before the current cost of living crisis.

Classroom hunger drives the education attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, leaving poorer children over 18 months behind their better-off peers by the time they leave secondary school. A-level and GCSE results this year showed regional and national disparities. The attainment

[Kim Johnson]

gap between the richest and the poorest pupils is more pronounced than ever. Even before the current cost of living crisis, Government policies failed to level up and instead fuelled spiralling inequalities.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate on such an important matter. As a former primary school teacher for many years, I know what she is saying: a child cannot learn if they are hungry in school. Does she agree that the announcement in today's energy statement does nothing to assure schools that are having to cut back their free school meal service to young people that those young people will not be going hungry in the weeks and months to come?

Kim Johnson: I do agree; children cannot learn on empty bellies. It is scandalous that, even at this young age, the futures of the most of them have already been decided. Their life expectancy, job opportunities, salary, housing and so much more have already been predetermined by their background—by situations that are outside their control.

The National Education Union's campaign, "No Child Left Behind", clearly identified child poverty as the biggest scandal of our time, with 4 million already living in poverty and a further three quarters of a million projected to be plunged into poverty in the coming months. In a recent NEU survey, over eight in 10 teachers said that their students demonstrate fatigue and an inability to concentrate as a result of poverty. Nearly three quarters said that their students were unable to complete homework and more than half said that their students had experienced hunger or ill health. Millions of children are going hungry every single day. The current restrictive eligibility, complicated registration procedures and the stigma built into a system that separates rich and poor mean that children are already missing out on existing support.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I thank my good friend for giving way and congratulate her on securing this important debate. I also paid tribute to her for organising an event with the National Education Union earlier this week in Westminster Hall to highlight the issues in our schools. The former Prime Minister preached to us about the benefits of levelling up, but one easy way to level up the north and the south, and also address the educational attainment gap and the lack of productivity, would be for the Government to make a universal free school meal offer to everyone so that our children are not segregated between rich and poor at our institutions.

Kim Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention and I definitely agree that universality is the way forward for free school meals.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. In York in 2021, 25.3% of children were in poverty, and that number will have gone up substantially in the last 12 months. One thing that really struck me about the event that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) is talking about was the stigma that

children experienced because they were different from other children. For that reason alone, surely we should have a universal offer of free school meals for children, so that they have the same stature as their peers and are not marked out as a child needing free school meals.

Kim Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention and will come on to the point about stigma later.

More than 200,000 children are eligible for free school meals but are currently missing out. At my free school meals event with the National Education Union on Tuesday in Parliament, which received cross-party support, we heard some heartbreaking testimonies from youth ambassadors for the End Child Poverty coalition.

Liv, Emilia and Naomi, who have lived experiences of food poverty, spoke passionately about their personal experiences of being singled out in front of their friends and watching their parents skip meals to ensure that they were fed. They spoke about the long-term impact on their mental health, on their relationship with food, and on their responses to the current pressures of the cost of living crisis, and about the trauma response that growing up with such pressures has instilled in them. One said that having free school meals was like having a badge pinned to their blazer that read "Poor." That stigma often worsens in secondary school and can be incredibly alienating for children struggling to fit in and thrive.

Data from the Child Poverty Action Group has shown that 800,000 children currently living in poverty are not eligible for free school meals, and miss out on holiday support and other benefits. That number is increasing every day, with many families falling into debt with school lunches. Crucially, children are denied a meal if they are more than two weeks in arrears.

On the steps of Downing Street on Tuesday, the new Prime Minister said that

"we have what it takes to tackle those challenges"

and that we can "ride out the storm", but the energy price guarantee announced this afternoon will not support families already in crisis. They will be paying far more, not less.

A recent report from the Food Foundation revealed that about 2.6 million children live in households that missed meals or struggled to access healthy food. Levels of insecurity in households with children have risen by more than 40% since the start of this year alone. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet so many low-paid workers, including public sector workers, rely on food banks. Nearly 70% of food bank providers say, however, that they may need to turn people away or shrink the size of emergency rations due to a completely unsustainable surge in demand that will prevent them from feeding the hungriest families this winter.

The Government-commissioned national food strategy, authored by Henry Dimbleby, calls for the extension of free school meals for all under-16-year-olds in households earning under £20,000, to help to tackle the nutritional gap between rich and poor in this country. Children in the most disadvantaged areas are now being diagnosed with Victorian diseases such as rickets, scurvy and scarlet fever—and that was even before the cost of living crisis.

Four councils have rolled out universal free school meals for all primary school children. Southwark pioneered that flagship initiative a decade ago in response to the so-called once-in-a-lifetime economic crisis. The results speak for themselves. Pupils made four to eight weeks' more progress than expected. The schools have seen a massive improvement in attainment over the last 10 years and have gone from being fourth bottom to more than 90% being rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. Nearly a quarter more children were eating vegetables at lunch time, and there was an 18% reduction in children consuming crisps and soft drinks. Hammersmith and Fulham has seen a 60% increase in secondary school children on free school meals since 2018, and it is now piloting universal free school meals for secondary pupils.

Universal provision contributes to family food security. It improves pupils' concentration and behaviour. It improves attendance, which is also a key aim of this Government's Schools Bill. It increases the amount of fruit and vegetables and reduces the amount of sugar and salt consumed by pupils at lunch time. Crucially, it also reduces the stigma that many children who receive free school meals feel when they are singled out from their peers.

Often, stigma and mental health are overlooked in Government policy discussions—poorer children are expected to put up and shut up, and be grateful for their handouts—but the reality is incredibly damaging. It can cause long-term trauma and problems, and makes the means-tested policy far less effective. Yes, universal free school meals will cost. Yes, they should be understood as an investment in our future. However, these are children, and everything we do should allow them to flourish and thrive. Their bright futures should be our priority. We cannot lose sight of the human impact of not feeding our children, or of choosing an arbitrary threshold to decide who deserves to go hungry and who deserves to be fed.

Universality provides far greater opportunities to improve educational attainment across the board and to reverse the ever-growing inequalities. Investing in our children now will be better for everyone in the long term. Prevention is better than cure. Doing nothing now will reduce the productivity of the future workforce. It will put greater pressures on the NHS. It risks a generation suffering from poor mental health and poor physical health, and being trapped in a never-ending cycle of poverty.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. I very much want York to adopt free school meals for all primary school children, and then to look at rolling that out to secondary school children. However, I also want to ensure that children in my constituency have access to a hot nutritious meal in their stomachs every day through the school holidays. I take it that my hon. Friend will also be campaigning against the school holiday hunger that we still see in our constituencies.

Kim Johnson: I thank my good friend for her contribution, and I definitely will be promoting food security during holiday periods. It is not just about children having a hot nutritious meal; in reality, it means so much more. It sets the foundations for improved behaviour and improved attainment. It means better

health, better jobs, higher salaries and higher life expectancy—in short, the chance to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

UK food prices have hit the highest levels since 2008. Children are going hungry right now. They simply cannot afford to wait for this Government while they are dragging their feet. The last time the Tories tried to resist helping hungry children, there was public outrage—

Navendu Mishra: Rightly so.

Kim Johnson: Yes, rightly so, and the campaign fronted by Marcus Rashford forced a U-turn within a matter of weeks. I hope the Minister can confirm that her Government will learn from past mistakes and act immediately to prevent unnecessary and unimaginable suffering for millions of children and their families. We will not allow this Government to continue to bury their head in the sand. On the steps of Downing Street this week, the outgoing Prime Minister claimed that the Tory party is a compassionate party. If that is truly the case, the new Prime Minister and the Education Secretary should take urgent steps to roll out universal free school meals as a priority.

4.33 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon, but I too would like to express my best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen and her family at this difficult time.

First, I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for securing this important debate at a crucial time, and I ask for her understanding as I was appointed merely a few hours ago. However, I will start by saying that I came into this role with great excitement, because I too care about my constituents and the young people in my constituency, and I absolutely agree that young children should go into school without experiencing hunger to be able to learn. I can assure the hon. Lady, immediately, that I look forward to working with her and others across the House as we move forward.

All Members have constituents who are struggling right now with the rising cost of living. It does not matter which side of the political spectrum we are on, we all know people who are currently finding it difficult. Like many hon. Members, one reason I came into politics was to change things for the better and help people, particularly in our constituencies. There can be no more deserving cause than making sure that a child has enough to eat. In this day and age, no one should accept the prospect of a child turning up, and trying their best to learn at school but being distracted by hunger. Children cannot learn properly if they are hungry, which is why plenty of safety mechanisms are in place to make sure that does not happen. I assure the House that the Government are totally committed to helping and supporting people who need support. That is part of our greater levelling-up ambitions.

Let me spell out in more detail what we are doing to support our most disadvantaged children and families. Free school meals are a vital means of ensuring that children get a decent meal if they come from families with parents who are out of work or on low incomes. Just under 2 million schoolchildren receive a free meal at lunchtime, under the benefit-related free school meal

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

policy. That will relieve pressure on their families, and ensure that children get at least one healthy and nutritious meal a day. A further 1.25 million infants are also getting a meal through the universal infant free school meal policy. That brings the total proportion of schoolchildren getting a free meal at lunchtime to around 38%.

I said earlier that we all care about ensuring that children are well nourished, and thanks to cross-Government work we have permanently extended free school meals to children from all families with no recourse to public funds who meet certain income thresholds. That came into effect after Easter this year. The Department's priority is to provide targeted support to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who are most in need. Extending free school meals to all pupils would carry a significant financial cost. We are confident that the current provision enables children to benefit, and is still affordable and deliverable for schools. That is currently the right approach in England, targeting those who need it most. As I said, we spend around £600 million per year ensuring that around 1.25 million infants enjoy a free, healthy, and nutritious meal at lunchtime, following the introduction of the universal infant free school meal policy in 2014. All Members here will have heard arguments from some quarters that we should roll out free school meals for all, but it is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged.

Navendu Mishra: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment. Will she comment on the point about stigma when it comes to means-tested free school meals? We do not have a means-tested system for schools in this country, but the Government test the means of the parents for free school meals. There is stigma that comes with poorer children being offered the free school meal option when others are not, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) spoke about the nutritional gap between children from wealthier families and those from poorer families. Will the Minister comment on that stigma, and on that productivity and nutritional gap?

Kelly Tolhurst: I absolutely get the point about stigma, and I know that schools work incredibly hard to overcome it. Free school meal eligibility will be under review, and in this post I look forward to getting into the detail and speaking to stakeholders, schools, parents and children, as I do already in my constituency. I look forward to widening the scope of that.

Rachael Maskell: I, too welcome the Minister to her new position. Richard Titmuss famously said that services to the poor are poor services. As we look at that divide, we know that many parents do not claim free school meals because of stigma, so children go hungry and without. Of course, parents often make sacrifices, too. Will she look at the equation again and at how we can bring greater equality into the lives of our young people?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. As I said, I, like all Members of Parliament, absolutely care about our young people in school and want them to thrive, have great lives and enjoy their school years, and we must ensure that stigma does not exist for them.

In my role, I will look at many things, and I am more than happy to look at that further. We do not have plans to extend the universal provision in England, but, as I said, we will continue to keep free school meal eligibility under review to ensure that those meals are supporting those who need it most.

Let us look at some of the detail. We currently have an earnings threshold of £7,400 for families on universal credit, but that does not include income from benefits—those payments are not included—so household incomes can be considerably higher than that threshold without children being excluded from a free school meal. Extending free school meals to all families on universal credit, for example, would carry a significant financial cost, quickly running into billions of pounds, and yet some of those households have incomes exceeding £40,000 a year. Those are clearly not among the most disadvantaged, and other households would have a greater need of our support.

As every family knows, it costs more to put a healthy meal on the table than it did even just a year ago, and it is no different for free school meal provision. We have therefore increased core funding for schools. This year, the free school meals factor in the national funding formula has increased to £470 per pupil to take into account inflation and other cost pressures that schools face. We are also providing extra core funding through the schools supplementary grant, which represents a significant increase of £2.5 billion for the 2022-23 compared with last year. We are also spending £600 million on universal infant free school meals each year as well as about £40 million on delivering free meals to around 90,000 disadvantaged students in further education. In addition to that, we will provide more than £200 million a year for the next three years to deliver healthy food during holiday periods through our holiday activities and food programme. We are also funding breakfast clubs in more than 2,000 schools, and the school fruit and vegetable scheme and Healthy Start vouchers add further support.

The Government are committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty—especially child poverty—and supporting people on lower incomes. There are currently about 1.27 million job vacancies across the UK, and we believe that the best and most sustainable way of tackling child poverty is to ensure that parents get the right sort of help and support to move into work. We know that employment—I am talking primarily about a full-time job—offers the best chance of reducing the risks of poverty. Our multimillion-pound plan for jobs has protected, supported and created jobs, and will continue to help people across the UK to find work and develop skills to progress their careers and increase their earnings.

Kim Johnson: I thank the Minister for giving way. She makes the point about work being the route out of poverty, but as I pointed out in my speech there are vast numbers of parents who are working and are ineligible to apply for free school meals. Work is not the route out of poverty, and some work needs to be done on that.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. In my new role, I have already committed to keeping eligibility under review.

Today, the Government set out decisive action to support people and businesses with their energy bills, tackling the root causes of the issues in the UK energy market through increased supply and ensuring the country is not left in the same position again. Under plans for the new energy price guarantee, a typical UK household will pay no more than £2,500 a year on its energy bills for the next two years from 1 October, saving the average household £1,000 a year from October, based on current energy prices. That support is in addition to the £400 energy bill discount for all households. Together, they will bring costs close to where the energy price cap stands today. The new guarantee will apply to households in Great Britain, with the same level of support made available to households in Northern Ireland. The action will deliver substantial benefits to the economy, boosting growth and curbing inflation by between four to five points, reducing the cost of servicing national debt. This historic intervention comes after a failure to invest in home-grown energy and to drive reform in the energy market.

Kim Johnson: Again, the money being made available will not target the most vulnerable, because we know there are thousands still in crisis who are likely to pay an extra £500 on top of what they were already going to pay. We know that the most disadvantaged who have payment meters often have to pay more than those who have direct debits. How will the Government address those major, urgent issues for the vulnerable at this time?

Kelly Tolhurst: Ahead of today, we had already announced a significant package of support for those most in need—I outlined the extra £400. Local authorities also have the household support grant scheme, which is accessible by people who are in need and is an opportunity for those who have fallen through certain gaps to access funding they may require.

We need to invest in home-grown energy and drive reform in the energy market to secure the UK's supply. Putin's weaponisation of the energy supply has exposed the UK's vulnerabilities to the volatility of global markets, coupled with a regulatory framework no longer fit for purpose which is driving up bills and holding back economic growth. A new six-month scheme for businesses and other non-domestic energy users, including public sector organisations like schools, will offer equivalent support to that being provided for consumers. That will protect them from soaring energy costs and provide them with the certainty they need to plan their business. After the initial six-month period, the Government will provide ongoing, focused support for vulnerable industries. There will be a review in three months' time to consider where that should be targeted to make sure that the most in need get support.

Rachael Maskell: Let me bring the Minister back to the debate about free school meals, because that is really important and I want to make sure that we make the most of this time and opportunity. One of the issues that I raised was holiday hunger and the fact that many children go without food during the school holidays, and that still continues. What steps will she take to ensure that all children who experience food poverty get access to a hot meal every day?

Kelly Tolhurst: It was important to mention the announcement today about help with energy costs, because those costs are playing a large role in the pressures that all households face, and that absolutely feeds into this debate.

The hon. Lady raises an important question about free school meals over the summer period. For families who have been eligible for that support, the Government are investing more than £600 million in our holiday activities and food programme over the next three years. That funding is being distributed through 152 local authorities. This summer, our holiday activities fund again provided healthy meals, enriched activities and free childcare places to children from low-income families. That benefited their health, wellbeing and learning and contributed to the recovery from covid-19.

Over the summer of 2021, we reached more than 600,000 children and young people in England through the holiday activities fund, including more than 495,000 children who were eligible for free school meals. That meant that hundreds of thousands of children from low-income families benefited from healthy food and increased activities.

Navendu Mishra: The Minister is being very generous with her time. The figure of £600 million will effectively be significantly lower now, with inflation and the cost of living crisis. Will she address the need going forward, rather than sharing the Government's numbers from last year, because £600 million will be a lot less—given that the rate of inflation is over 10% now—than it was last year?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman. However, one of the benefits of the holiday activities fund is that the decision making is given to local authorities, so that they can design systems that meet the need in their areas and make sure that they design tailored programmes and deliver services to meet the individual needs of the people they serve. He should understand that the amount is £600 million over three years, so there is £200 million a year.

In my constituency in other roles that I held, I spent a lot of time working with families and young children before I became a Member of Parliament. I am very passionate about this role and am looking forward to working with Members across the House. I do not have children but I have nieces. However, someone does not have to be a parent to find the idea of a hungry child plain wrong, as I think we all agree across the House. We can do—and are doing—something about it and I promise hon. Members that child wellbeing and nutrition is right at the top of my priorities.

Mike Kane: I welcome the Minister to her position. Having worked with her on the transport brief at the start of the pandemic, I know that she will be diligent in the role.

Even though my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) is a Liverpool fan, she mentioned Marcus Rashford—one of the most famous child hunger campaigners in the country, and a famous son of Wythenshawe in my constituency. He grew up just down the road; one of us is a great footballer, one of us

[Mike Kane]

is a great politician, and I am neither. If it were offered, would the Minister be prepared to meet him in her new role?

Kelly Tolhurst: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I very rarely refuse a request for a meeting. I am hoping to have many months to meet stakeholders, interested parties and people who feel as passionate as I do about these areas.

I am confident that the safeguards we have in place mean that once a child is through the school gates in the morning, the one thing that they should never have to worry about is where their next meal is coming from. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside for her patience with my being new to the post, and I look forward to working with her.

Question put and agreed to.

4.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 September 2022

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Menopause and the Workplace

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before we start, I would like to repeat the statement made by Mr Speaker in the House of Commons, who sent his best wishes on behalf of everyone to Her Majesty the Queen and the royal family, who are in our thoughts and prayers at this moment.

Caroline Nokes will speak on the publication of the first report of the Women and Equalities Committee, “Menopause and the Workplace”, for up to 10 minutes, during which I cannot allow any interventions. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members who wish to ask questions on the subject of the statement, and call Caroline Nokes to respond. I must remind everyone that questions should be brief. I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Thank you, Mr Robertson, and I associate myself with the comments made by yourself and by Mr Speaker.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me time in this Chamber and the opportunity to make this statement. I pass on my thanks to the Clerks to the Women and Equalities Committee and to the entire Committee for their incredibly hard work. It is now over a year since we launched the inquiry, a year in which we have seen menopause and its health and workplace issues rise to prominence. I think it is fair to say that there was a time, not that long ago, when nobody in this place would have wanted to talk about the menopause, and women of a certain age—that is, my age—would have been very anxious about talking about it publicly for fear of the stigma and taboo that is sometimes associated with menopause.

There has been a massive sea change in recent years. We have seen debates, both in this Chamber and on the Floor of the House, where Members—both male and female—have been very happy to talk about their own experiences and champion the change that we wish to see for our constituents. It was really encouraging to see the large number of Members who took part in the debate on World Menopause Month last year. I am sure that the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and I will be applying for another debate this year. We have had long discussions about the menopause workplace pledge, menopause workplace policies, and the importance of employers and businesses, whether large or small, adopting menopause-friendly policies. Indeed, we saw Mr Speaker sign the menopause workplace pledge on

behalf of the House of Commons and the civil service, and we have also seen private companies such as John Lewis and Royal Mail sign that pledge.

What matters to me and my Committee, however, is not just a commitment from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to work hand in hand with businesses signing up to those sorts of pledges and introducing policies, but that those policies are implemented and acted on. When we launched the inquiry, we discovered that, although things have improved, this is no time to be complacent. In 2019, Bupa published research showing that almost 1 million women had left their jobs due to menopause symptoms, and that many women are still facing stigma in society and at work and are struggling to get diagnosis and treatment.

We launched the inquiry because menopause is an inevitable and natural part of growing older, but stigma, poor medical treatment and feeling compelled to give up work or to not take on promotions at the peak of one's career should never be considered inevitable or normal. We took evidence from academics, lawyers, doctors, experts in business and people with lived experience, and they all said the same thing: yes, things are getting better, but there is still a long way to go.

We also looked at menopause as a health issue—the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East on hormone replacement therapy is very well known. On health, we found that stigma around menopause is still a significant problem for all women, but it is magnified for certain groups, such as minority ethnic women. I pay particular tribute to Karen Arthur, who came and gave evidence on behalf of black women going through the menopause. Certainly, younger women and LGBT+ people who have faced premature menopause and surgical menopause have faced particular challenges because it is not seen as a problem for them.

We have welcomed the inclusion of menopause on the relationships, health and sex education curriculum, but we want to see a really inclusive and high-profile public health and education campaign on menopause. There is some great work being carried out by organisations such as Pausitivity. Indeed, in my own county of Hampshire, great campaigners such as Jo Ibbott and Claire Hattrick have worked so hard on this issue. However, what we really want to see from the Department of Health and Social Care is an inclusive and high-profile public health campaign.

We heard that far too many women struggle to get an accurate diagnosis and that access to specialist services is limited. Women told us horrendous stories of being dismissed and ignored and having to really fight to explain what was going wrong with them to their GPs in order to get the appropriate prescriptions. The issues of access to HRT and the cost of prescriptions have been raised many times in this Chamber, but they are worth reiterating. Although we were pleased to see the appointment of the HRT tsar, we are worried that she is now headed back to her previous role as head of the vaccine taskforce while there are still shortages and protocols around 12 of the 13 HRT medicines.

At this point, I would like to pay particular tribute to the work of the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who did fantastic work on this in her previous post. We are sorry to see her go. It is poignant that today is the first day that over-the-counter HRT medicines have been available—I pay tribute to her for making that possible.

[*Caroline Nokes*]

Women are staying in work for longer. Women over 50 are the fastest growing demographic in the workplace. However, despite being among the most experienced and skilled workers, and, indeed, role models to younger workers, some women are leaving their jobs, being forced out or forced to cut back their hours.

We heard about the many ways in which menopause can affect work, such as through problematic symptoms. Some 99% of respondents to a survey we ran outlined that they had at least one problematic symptom. In a modern society, it cannot be right that women are being discriminated against and that the menopause is contributing to women reducing their hours or leaving work altogether. We are losing skills, future generations are losing the benefit of their wisdom, and the economy is haemorrhaging talent.

The positive benefits of being menopause-friendly are obvious. They include not only strong reputational benefits, but the ability to retain the best and most experienced staff and to help women to thrive in the workplace. All of this will help to reduce the gender pay and pension gap. We heard that supporting menopausal employees need not be resource-intensive or costly. We heard of some fantastic schemes about menopause workplace champions. When employers ask, “What is the one thing we can do to support our female employees going through the menopause?”, the answer that invariably comes back is, “Give them space to talk and someone that they can trust to take their issues to.” Some of the organisations we spoke to had fantastic “Ask me” T-shirts, encouraging women to speak up and speak out.

We were shocked, however, to find how little awareness and guidance there is that the menopause can be both a health and safety at work issue and an equality issue. We have called on both the Health and Safety Executive and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to urgently issue menopause-specific guidance.

The current law makes it extremely difficult for women to bring a claim. I regard bringing a claim to a tribunal as a failure of workplace policies, but it does happen, and we have to ensure that it is easier for women to bring a menopause-specific claim. Both sex discrimination and age discrimination require a comparator—I know that hon. Members will immediately see the problem with a menopausal woman having to compare herself to a sick man in order to get redress. Too many women have been forced to resort to disability discrimination legislation in order to bring a claim. We considered whether any measure short of legal reform would help, but concluded that the Government needed to enact section 14 of the Equality Act 2010 to allow women to bring claims based on dual discrimination and to consult on making menopause a protected characteristic.

In conclusion, I hope that this important report will continue to drive social change and further encourage cross-Government action. It is imperative that all Government Departments are involved, including the Department of Health and Social Care, BEIS and the Departments for Education and for Work and Pensions. We need to improve the diagnosis and treatment of women and keep those many menopausal women who should be thriving at work in work. While we heard of many terrible experiences for women, we also heard from some utterly inspirational women and organisations.

Let us continue the hard work that we have started, and find the ability to celebrate menopausal women’s contributions to society and the economy. I hope that the Minister will look at the work of the women’s health strategy, where menopause has been a priority—and the recently appointed women’s health ambassador, Dame Lesley Regan, is already doing great work—and make sure that women’s health, particularly menopausal women’s health, remains a priority.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Perfect timing. Thank you very much.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee and the entire Committee for this important report. It rightly brings attention to the additional discrimination in the workplace and stigma that women from ethnic minorities go through during the menopause phase, which is often neglected in the wider conversation. Disappointingly, however, these problems were not mentioned in the relevant section of the Government’s women’s health strategy. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the Government should give consideration to the specific issues faced by ethnic minority women?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Member for her question. She makes an important point. Not all women will experience the menopause in the same way, and not all cultures will address it in the same way. One of my biggest challenges as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee is to make sure that we address the intersectional issues. Fifty-one per cent. of our population are women, and the Committee will always be champions for them, but we must also address the different ways in which people of different ethnicities and ages and those with different disabilities will encounter various challenges relating to not just the menopause but health and workplace issues. It is imperative that we keep emphasising that, and that we do not take a one-size-fits-all approach to the issue of equalities, because it is simply not appropriate.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): As well as making up over 50% of the population, women are the fastest growing group in the workplace and are staying in work longer than ever before. Does the right hon. Lady therefore agree that it is vital that the Government appoint a menopause ambassador to champion good practice, and that they commence section 14 of the Equality Act 2010 to allow dual discrimination claims? And a fellow member of the Women and Equalities Committee, does she agree that, despite the fact that the word “women” has this week been dropped from departmental and ministerial titles relating to women and equalities, women, as well as equalities, will always remain at the top of the Committee’s agenda?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my fellow Committee member for her question. It is important that we have a menopause ambassador. The hon. Member is right to point out that the largest growing demographic in the workplace is women over 50. I would like to see much more effort go into championing—I hate to have to say this, but I declare an interest—women over 50. We potentially have ahead of us the best part of 20 years of further contribution to make to the workforce before hitting

retirement age. It is imperative that we champion—I hate to use this word—older women, women with experience, and women who can act as role models. It is crucial that we do so. A menopause ambassador would be a good step, and I would like them to have a cross-cutting remit so that they can consider what can be done at DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care, and how menopausal issues can be championed in education and, of course, at BEIS. That would be a wide remit, and I am absolutely fixated on this. We should be looking at ways in which we can ensure that there are opportunities for women to retrain and to access finance to establish and grow their own businesses. There would be a massive boost to the economy if women were starting and scaling up businesses at the same rate as men.

The hon. Member makes an excellent point about dual discrimination, which the report covers in detail. The report does not call for menopause to instantly be made a protected characteristic, but we do say that the Government should consult on that, and I hope that they will have the courage to do so. We also say that section 14 of the Equality Act should be enacted immediately. I apologise for this very long answer, but that would give women the ability to bring a discrimination case on two protected characteristics—namely, age and sex. That would be a really important step forward, because we know that the menopause happens only to natal women and to those women who have transitioned to be legally men, so we must not exclude them and it is crucial that we do not forget about them.

We know that discrimination against LGBT+ people can be more severe than against others. A dual discrimination claim could be enacted swiftly and easily, and it would mean that women would not have to bring claims about the menopause under disability discrimination legislation. The menopause is many things—it is hideous, it is hot, it takes away your ability to concentrate and can leave you unable to sleep—but it is not a disability. Interestingly, many of the cases that have been brought under disability discrimination legislation have been found not proven, because it is not a disability.

The hon. Lady made a final point, one which is core to the work of my Committee, about the inclusion of the word “women” in women and equalities. I am absolutely determined that, in my time as Chair, the Committee will champion the rights of women and the inclusion of women, and will not see women erased.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady and the Select Committee for the report, and I thank her for her contribution. As hon. Members will know, I have supported this issue the whole way through, primarily because my own wife was going through it, and that gave me experience and understanding.

I understand that there are more women, including those over the age of 50, in employment than there have been for a great number of years, so this report is really important. Has the report been shared with other Administrations? I am very keen to ensure that we in Northern Ireland have the same opportunity to make important changes. Employing six ladies in my office, as I do, I understand that it is important to give space. Let us do that in Northern Ireland as well.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I can think of many an occasion when I have heard him speak in debates on the menopause, and I thank him for his commitment to the issue. He is right to point out that there are more women in employment now than I think at any time previously during my lifetime. That is a huge bonus and benefit that we should celebrate. We must hold up those women over 50 or those menopausal women in employment as role models and champions. They are the vanguard for a younger generation, and can be the menopause workplace champions who can provide the advice and that safe space for talking about this.

This issue absolutely applies across the whole of the United Kingdom, and we have to spread best practice. My Select Committee is tentatively considering a visit to Northern Ireland. I very much hope that we will get consent from the Liaison Committee to go on our first visit to Northern Ireland, and we hope to squeeze in a little trip to Dublin at the same time. People are looking to us as world leaders on this issue. I have been stunned at the number of parliamentarians from overseas who have contacted me about the work that we are doing here in the United Kingdom on the menopause. It is imperative that the work is shared among the devolved Administrations as well.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Women and Equalities Committee and am enjoying the outbreak of agreement across this Chamber today—it is not always that way. The right hon. Lady's comments about why it is so important that we talk about this issue resonate with me. It is not a niche issue. I talked about it with some constituents at the Neilston Menopause Café last week, or the week before—I can't remember; that might be brain fog. It was an extremely useful opportunity for women at a particular point in their lives to have those conversations. Does the right hon. Lady agree that bringing that opportunity into the workplace context is particularly important, so that people can and do understand that the menopause is absolutely normal?

If I may, I will push my luck a little and ask a second question. The right hon. Lady mentioned prescription charges, which we do not face in Scotland, but does she agree that another issue for women who go through the menopause may be inadequate sick pay, which can exacerbate already troubling issues? Could the Committee focus its attention on that, given its impact on so many women?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes a number of important points. She has been to her local Menopause Café. There is a brilliant group in my constituency called What the Fog? I will be doing a seminar with it in a few weeks' time. It is imperative that we normalise this in the workplace. I have spent the summer talking to organisations and businesses, large and small. I talked to an enormous group of women at Scania in Milton Keynes. It was incredibly. Just giving people the space to share their own experiences was really important to them, and it got the conversation going.

The hon. Lady has absolutely hit the nail on the head about the cost of the menopause. There is a cost to business, to the economy and to individual women. What we call for in the report is a trial, from a large-scale

[*Caroline Nokes*]

public sector employer, of menopause workplace leave. I would love to see a public sector organisation come forward and volunteer to do that. We understand that it is difficult for some women; they will have horrendous symptoms, but they can get it through it, and maybe leave is the answer.

Support for Local Food Infrastructure

1.50 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of support for local food infrastructure.

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. At the outset, I should declare my own interests. For many years, I have been a partner in two family farms in Suffolk, and from this June I chair a community interest company called REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries—which has the objective of reinvigorating the East Anglian fishing industry for the benefit of local communities such as Lowestoft in my constituency. REAF's objectives very much coincide with the issues that will be raised in this debate.

On the farm where I grew up and still live, we have a pig unit. Forty years ago, pigs were conceived, born, reared and fattened on the farm, with feed milled and mixed there, and when the time came they went to an abattoir that was also in Suffolk. Today, things are very different; the piglets are born on different farms, moved to ours for rearing, then sent to abattoirs that are often a long way away. There is a risk that I will become dewy-eyed and sentimental—yes, the new way of doing things may be more efficient, but it is also of less benefit to local economies and communities, and an enormous number of food miles are generated. In many places local food infrastructure no longer exists. This needs to be addressed, as research carried out by Sustain confirms that local food systems provide better environmental, economic and social returns.

While much of this debate is focused on the long-term structural improvements that are needed to local food infrastructure, it is necessary to highlight the enormous pressures that currently impact all aspects of food production: the dramatic rise in energy prices, the supply and crippling cost of fertiliser and carbon dioxide, and the acute shortage of staff. If Government policy promotes the development of greater local supply, with the necessary supporting infrastructure, then we can embed greater resilience against these punitive outside forces.

It is important to provide some background information on the current state of the food sector. The groceries market in 2020 was worth £200 billion. The nine largest food retailers control over 90% of the market and, on average, farmers get only 9% of the agrifood gross value added. The 2021 Groceries Code Adjudicator survey showed a backwards slide on fairness: some 39% of fish caught by UK boats is landed and processed abroad, with little benefit coming back to local fishing communities such as the one in Lowestoft. To improve the situation, there is a need for investment in food infrastructure, including hubs for collaborative produce marketing, processing facilities, storage and refrigeration premises, abattoirs, dairy and creamery facilities, better signage and promotion of markets, improved digital and IT systems, farmers' markets and grain and oilseed pressers.

Hubs can be provided at showgrounds, as the Suffolk Agricultural Association and the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association are doing. As the drought

persists in Suffolk—but perhaps not at the Oval—it is important to highlight the need for improved water infrastructure.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I wholly support all the very important infrastructure investments that my hon. Friend has detailed, but on water, which is a vital ingredient in the mix, I want to raise my concern about local food partnerships. Because they are not commercially operated, they are suffering in this drought due to the water restrictions. I believe that some water companies are using their discretion, but South East Water is not. Is my hon. Friend sympathetic to my request to South East Water to revisit its policy and provide the relevant level of water support to local food partnerships, such as mine in Eastbourne, so that they can truly take their place and be part of the local food infrastructure?

Peter Aldous: Yes, I am sympathetic to that, and I will touch on water infrastructure a number of times during my speech. We probably have not realised its significance and importance up until the past few weeks, when it has become apparent. The harvest on the farm I come from was okay, but as these conditions persist, what will next year's harvest be like? These problems will not just be here for this season; they may be here for some years to come.

The Countryside Alliance highlights five challenges that we need to address. There is a need for enhanced food security, which is particularly important given the appalling ongoing war in Ukraine. We need to bear it in mind that the UK produces some of the best food in the world, with the highest standards for safety and animal welfare, and we must build on that sound foundation.

A network of local abattoirs is vital, both to shorten the food miles and to enhance animal welfare. There is a need to improve public sector procurement, as highlighted in the Government's food strategy. Last year, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended that access to procurement contracts be widened to smaller local suppliers without delay. There remains a need to improve food labelling, as that can empower the consumer. Finally, it is absolutely vital that digital infrastructure be improved in rural areas, as good connectivity allows businesses to find new and local markets and enables customers to access local produce online.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator, into which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is currently carrying out a review, plays an important role in monitoring, ensuring compliance and enforcing the code, which helps strengthen the food supply chain of suppliers, retailers and consumers. Although that is not a matter directly for this debate, it is vital that the Government retain the adjudicator.

In Suffolk and Norfolk in 2019, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership set up its Norfolk and Suffolk Agri-Food Industry Council, to which REAF is making a presentation next week. The council's role is to provide a strategic direction for the industry, which has a gross value added in the two counties of £3.1 billion and a workforce of 71,700. It produces 16.6% of the UK's fruit and vegetables and 17.6% of our poultry.

The local infrastructure issues into which the council believes there is a need for strategic investment from the Government are as follows. As we have heard, there must be investment in water infrastructure to tackle the shortages that fruit and vegetable growers are increasingly facing. Shortages of electricity at key sites are blocking development opportunities. That is a problem at Ellough, on the outskirts of Beccles in my constituency. In transport and logistics, there is a need to improve key infrastructure routes and enhance cold chains—refrigerated facilities right along the supply chain.

The council highlights the need to ensure farmers and rural communities still receive the same level and quality of support, whether financial or through advisory services, under environmental land management schemes and the UK's shared prosperity fund, as they did before we left the EU. Under the Government's current proposals, Suffolk will receive less through the shared prosperity fund than it did through the previous EU structural funding. The allocation under the previous regime was estimated at between £18 million and £24 million, while under the shared prosperity fund it is proposed that it will be about £12 million. Anecdotally, there are reports of other areas receiving uplifts. Suffolk MPs have written to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to highlight this iniquity, and anything that my right hon. Friend the Minister in his new position can do to address it will be greatly appreciated.

It is important to showcase examples of good practice, where local initiatives are strengthening local food infrastructure. Three examples that I will mention come from very different backgrounds. First, in 2012, just outside Beccles in my constituency, Josiah Meldrum, Nick Saltmarsh and William Hudson founded Hodmedod to supply grain, pulses, flour and other products from British farms. They wanted to get local food systems working, to challenge the dominant just-in-time distribution systems and to bring more pulses and wholegrains back into the British diet as crucially neglected crops. They work closely with farmers, processors, packers and manufacturers to produce the crops, pack them after harvest and create the ever-growing range of products that they sell to customers online and in shops. The business relies on close relationships between farmers, buyers and those in the supply chain in between to ensure that the system delivers good livelihoods. They have invested in processing machinery to support that.

Secondly, while water companies are very much under the microscope at present, it is important to highlight the work of Anglian Water in providing latent heat from its sewage treatment plants to industrial-scale greenhouses at Fornham near Bury St Edmunds and at Whitlingham near Norwich. It is also making fertiliser from the sewage treatment process.

Finally, last week, the Government committed to making a significant investment in the Sizewell C nuclear power station on the Suffolk coast. Much work remains to be done before EDF can make a final investment decision and work can start on the site; it is carrying out preparatory work that includes the provision of a desalination plant, which in due course could help address the water challenge we have touched on. The energy and agricultural sectors need to work together to provide for our future water needs. That involves ensuring that groundwater is not extracted to such an extent that it exacerbates the biodiversity challenge that we are already facing.

[*Peter Aldous*]

As to how we can deliver meaningful investment to local food infrastructure, to benefit not only local businesses and producers but local people and communities, it is important to mention that the Government are coming forward with initiatives to improve the situation. Those include the fisheries and seafood scheme and the rural England prosperity fund that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced last week. Its launch of the review of the pig supply chain is also to be welcomed, as the industry is currently loss-making and clearly not working in a fair and transparent way. That said, however, my sense is that more can be done. The National Farmers Union highlights the need to improve the planning system. With regard to investment, it points to the need to make the UK the go-to place for investment in agriculture and food production. It proposes a regulatory system that protects consumers and the environment while incentivising innovation and investment, through both planning and fiscal policy.

The Government can take a number of steps to boost local food infrastructure. They include targeted productivity grants, which allow farmers to secure the win-win of more profitable and more sustainable food production that uses resources more efficiently; and investment in research and development and in agri-tech, involving effective two-way knowledge exchange, so that British farmers and growers can have access to the best tools and technologies. The NFU highlights the need to increase procurement opportunities for regionally produced food and prepare local food strategies. The strategies should be developed with LEPs, which have the best understanding of local food supply needs.

Sustain highlights the need to use “all the tools in the box” to promote local growth in shorter supply chains and with innovation at local and national level. It emphasises the need for public money for start-up funding to get new businesses established. That in turn would act as a catalyst for private sector investment. There is also a need for tax relief and low rents on local authority-controlled properties for local SME food businesses to help get them established in those difficult first two years.

Sustain also proposes that the UK Government should use the existing budgets and pots of funding—such as the UK shared prosperity fund and the community ownership fund—to create a £300 million to £500 million local food investment fund to provide strategic support across the UK for investment in localised agrifood infrastructure and enterprise.

Mr Robertson, you will be pleased to hear that I am coming to a conclusion. While these are troubled times and the immediate outlook is very uncertain, there is no reason why, working together, national and local government, public and private utilities, businesses all along the supply chain and local communities cannot bring about a sea change in how we produce, sell eat, and celebrate our food. That, in turn, can build self-sufficiency, embed long-term resilience and enhance community pride. If we do that, we can provide an exemplar, which can be a flagship for global Britain.

I welcome the Minister to his place. He is very much the right person to be answering this debate. I look forward to his reply and hope he will endorse that

ambition and commit the Government to working with a very wide range of interested parties to deliver that truly sustainable future.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): So that I can get everyone in, I will ask hon. Members to stick to five minutes, please.

2.6 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this debate. As many people in this room are, I am passionate about food, particularly locally grown food. Our relationship with food, and how and when it can go wrong, is also important to me. I am very pleased to take part in this debate on food infrastructure because I think it is a critical point that is affecting many communities up and down the country.

I would like to commend the work of groups such as Regather, Our Cow Molly, which is a great dairy—the last dairy—in Sheffield, and the Sheffield Foodhall. They play a vital role in the local food infrastructure of my city.

Food prices, as we know, are spiralling. It is tempting to blame all of that on the war in Ukraine—Russia and Ukraine are obviously the largest producers of grain in the world—but the instability created by the war has only contributed to an existing problem. The Office for National Statistics figures for the retail prices index on food and catering were increasing way before the war—back in March last year.

One of the key drivers of rising food prices, and the volatility in prices, has been speculation on the international commodity markets. The UK imports just over half of its food, making it even more vulnerable to that volatility. The news that the pound has slumped to a 37-year low against the dollar will only increase the price of imported food, hitting people even harder in their pockets. Yesterday's Financial Services and Markets Bill, which repeals the MiFID II regulations on commodity trading, will make that situation even worse.

The effects of that international context are writ large in statistics published by the Trussell Trust. Last year, it issued 2.2 million three-day emergency food parcels—an increase of 14% since the start of the pandemic, while, according to the Food Foundation, a shameful 13% of households are currently skipping meals. It is therefore vital that we are having this debate on local food infrastructure.

Building resilience to the chaos of international markets will need a concerted international effort to stop speculation—an effort that is currently missing from Government policy. It also means that building up capacity and food security at home has never been so important. A critical part of that must be supporting and expanding our local food infrastructure. We need investment to plug the gaps in local supply chains, to strengthen them, and to expand their capacity. We also need to fund advice and mentoring for farmers on business planning and sustainable farming methods, and, as the NFU has said, much more effort needs to go into encouraging public and private sector businesses to procure local food.

Our planning system also needs to change. It needs to encourage the diversification of food outlets and the growth of infrastructure supporting shorter supply chains, and it needs to safeguard the best land for agricultural use—it is pointless to waste nutrients if we can avoid it. We need to use shorter supply chains to build wealth in our communities. According to Sustain, every £10 spent on a local box scheme results in total spending of £25 in the local area, compared with just £14 when the same amount is spent in a supermarket. Changing food procurement guidelines and processes—making them more flexible to support local food suppliers—will be crucial for keeping money locally.

Most of all, however, we need a national strategy that joins up the action on the ground and that guarantees a right to food. During the pandemic I called for more support for people who were not getting access to food, and mutual aid and community organisations sprang up across the country, including Acorn, Voluntary Aid Sheffield and Sheffield Foodhall in my city. They delivered food to vulnerable people across the country, and the Government also stepped in to deliver food directly through local authorities. Just as Bevan saw in the Tredegar Medical Aid Society a blueprint for delivering universal healthcare, we should see in this network the beginnings of an infrastructure to deal with food insecurity. These community hubs should be formalised and given the backing and logistical support that they need to provide affordable food for people who need it. In this collective network, we can see the shape of a national service that would provide food for all and ensure that nobody went hungry. It needs only to have material and logistical support, and co-ordination from the state, and it must be integrated into existing local food infrastructure, which is waiting to be exploited.

A food system that leaves us vulnerable to chaos in world markets, or that results in more than one in 10 households skipping meals in one of the richest countries in the world, is not fit for purpose. The scale of the problems in the system must be matched by ambitions to build a new one. The seeds of the new way of doing things have been sown in the decentralised network of organisations, businesses and community groups that make up our local food infrastructure. We must nurture them and ensure that they grow into the local, democratic and sustainable food systems that we need and that many are crying out for.

2.12 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech. Like me, he has long championed the vital role of food in every aspect of our health, from the health of our children and communities to the health of our nation and planet.

To solve the current challenges that we face as a nation, growing the economy to create jobs and fund our public services will be essential. In a country where 99% of businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises—5.6 million in total—we need to support our local businesses in every town and city, and in every village and neighbourhood, if they are to survive and thrive. The Government can only do so much; as consumers, we need to do our part by reflecting on how we buy goods and services, and on what impact those decisions have on our local economy.

Many local businesses are food businesses—from our local corner shops that we depended on during covid lockdowns, to the cafes, restaurants and pubs that are the lifeblood of our high streets, and the market stalls that sell us fruit and vegetables, local cheeses or baked goods. I am always pleased to highlight the new food businesses that bring variety to my local high streets and increase the choices that we have in Stoke-on-Trent. In Hanley, recent additions have been the bao buns at Dumpling King, the lamb patties at Hamilton Bay and Asian fusion cuisine at Wagamama. The monthly artisan market that brings local producers into the city centre, and the fruit and veg stall outside the main entrance to the Royal Stoke Hospital, are evidence that there is growing food choice and better access to healthy food in my city. The local economy also benefits from new businesses such as Long Rest and Geek Retreat, which combine entertainment and refreshment by offering gaming alongside food and drink.

Businesses offering food and drink are key in complementing a retail offer that has been steadily shrinking. Changes in consumer buying patterns mean that our high streets are no longer dominated by large retail chains, so the rise of local independent businesses that are personally invested in the local community will be the key driver of the renaissance of town centres. Local people judge the success of regeneration by how their high street looks, and pride of place is vital to residents' feeling of wellbeing and optimism about their local area. Too many areas are blighted by half-empty high streets, with negative impacts like uncleanness and antisocial behaviour.

My personal passion for the food agenda has been shaped by two years of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on the national food strategy. While a number of recommendations from the Dimpleby review have been taken up by the Government, the fundamental challenge of how we systematically tackle the many broken elements of our food system remains unsolved. To provide a holistic solution, we need a food taskforce across multiple Departments and a good food Bill to enshrine reforms in law. This year in the UK we have experienced the hottest and driest weather on record. Conditions have caused crop failure and nature loss, making our land less productive. That is a system failure, not the fault of individual farmers or consumers, but we all face the consequences.

There is much to be done, and I am determined to champion innovation and investment in our local food infrastructure in Stoke-on-Trent. To that end, I would like to invite the Minister to a food summit that I am hosting at Staffordshire University on 4 November. The theme is

“From Field to Fork—The Future of Food,”

—that is a bit of a mouthful—

“exploring solutions to climate, health and food security challenges”.

I have invited food innovators to showcase their businesses and ideas.

To build national resilience to food insecurity, we need to grow—quite literally—our local food production and enable smaller food businesses to thrive. We also need to back local food manufacturers and retailers, which create employment opportunities, and welcome their engagement in community ventures. More than that, we need to grow community involvement in the

[Jo Gideon]

redistribution of food, to minimise food waste. We need to encourage more community restaurants and food enterprises—more places that offer low-cost food, such as food clubs and pantries, which ensure that food surplus from the supply chain is not wasted. These need to be organised from within neighbourhoods and communities at the most local level.

We need cookery classes and clubs, as well as community kitchens, to help with the cost of food preparation and to teach new skills. Growing schemes in community allotments are springing up around the city. There is definitely more that can be done to support improving the urban environment, such as planting community orchards on public land that has lain fallow for many years and represents a cost to councils. Does the Minister agree that local authorities should be supported to pilot schemes that develop surplus land and premises for urban farming and sustainable food production, delivering benefits for the public good? Does the Minister also agree that it is time for a major conversation around our food system, with the basic principles at its heart of buying local, supporting British producers and working together to ensure that consumers everywhere have access to good-quality, local food.

Only communities can build a strong and sustainable local food infrastructure. However, Government can help in a number of ways, from setting procurement standards, which ensures that more locally sourced produce is supplied to our public sector, to incentivising urban growing and new community food enterprises or investing in projects relating to diet and public health that promote good food choices. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs commissioned the national food strategy report to identify many of these challenges. Now is the time to take forward the solutions.

2.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank you for giving me the chance to speak, Mr Robertson, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for raising the issue. He and I have many things in common, including that we represent coastal areas where there is fishing and farming. He has clearly illustrated his depth of knowledge on the subject matter, and we thank him for that.

My five-minute speech will focus not just on all the good things that Strangford has, because it would take more than five minutes to say them, but on the bigger story as well. Can I say how pleased I am to see the Minister in his place? I miss him as Leader of the House, but I am pleased to see him here to take up the cudgels on behalf of farming and fishing. I wish him well and know that we will be able to enjoy and take note of his knowledge of those areas.

The United Kingdom is largely self-sufficient in terms of our food and drink industry. The UK food supply represents some 6.8% of gross value added. It is worth £107 million and provides 4 million jobs, with around half a million people in farming and fishing. In Northern Ireland, food and drink is a £5.4 billion industry. As I was sitting here, I was thinking about beef and lamb because they are significant in my constituency. They

are worth £1.3 billion. Some 5,000 staff are involved in processing beef and lamb, and 20,000 farmers are active in that industry. Also, we export 70% of that beef and lamb, because in Northern Ireland we produce more than we eat as the population is only 1.8 million. For us, the UK mainland is so important for our produce for export. Our success is down to pure and fresh manufacturing from local farmers and countryside, right through to our fishermen who provide the local seafood from Portavogie harbour in my constituency of Strangford and down as far as Annalong and Kilkeel in South Down.

Strangford is lucky enough to have numerous food infrastructure manufacturers. We have incredible vegetable suppliers in Willowbrook Foods, and Mash Direct and Rich Sauces. Strangford has one of Lakeland Dairies' main factories—one of nine it has across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—which distributes dairy products across Northern Ireland and further afield. Newtownards high street has four butcheries, which are all very successful and have their own regulars who dare not go anywhere else. Those four butchers employ some 80 staff. They do a lot of work in their butchers'; it is not just a butcher's front shop, but more than that.

A thriving food economy supports and brings benefits for local nature and habitats. Financing our rural communities is crucial to securing good food infrastructure. The International Institute for Sustainable Development said that those areas around the globe where people are suffering hunger are fairly rural areas, which lack basic services such as energy, due to a lack of infrastructure. Food security is a global effort—the Minister might wish to reply on that—and we must ensure that we commit our efforts to enabling others to prosper through trade and other food facilities.

Recently, concerns have been voiced—which we all share—over the rise in food prices due to the cost of living. In 2020 to 2021, in the peak of the pandemic, 6% of all UK households were food-insecure. The Trussell Trust, whose first food bank ever in Northern Ireland was in my constituency of Strangford, provided 2.2 million three-day food packages during that period. That was echoed in my constituency, and our local food bank has seen a rise in the number of households getting assistance from the Trussell Trust and other charitable organisations. They tell me that the demand now is even higher than it was way back then; we worry about that. To secure the future of our food security and infrastructure, we must deal with those pressing issues, such as food poverty, which our constituents are facing daily.

In 2022, the national food strategy aims to secure the resilience of our food supply system, so that UK-wide consumers have a choice in accessing healthy and affordable food. Our constituents deserve a food industry that can provide for them. Moreover, we must ensure that access to the market is readily affordable and available, and that praise is given to those in the food and drink sector for assisting in providing decent food infrastructure.

The Government have a food infrastructure strategy for England. I encourage the Minister and his Department to ensure that food infrastructure is given nationwide consideration and that, most importantly, the effects of the Northern Ireland protocol do not have an impact on Northern Ireland's contribution to the UK's food security and infrastructure. The Minister at DEFRA

has always had a close relationship with our Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots. I have no doubt whatsoever that that will continue and it is important that it does. The sector provides so much for all of us, together. I always say this and I do not take away from it: we are always better together. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, all the four regions together and working as one, and those exports, if we can all do them together, mean that we all benefit.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I will impose a formal four-minute limit.

2.23 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate. I also want to welcome the Minister to his place this afternoon. I know he farms himself, so I hope he will listen. He has visited my beautiful constituency and heard of the plight of my 1,400-plus farmers and the more than 90,000 hectares of land farmed in North Devon.

I take the opportunity to sing the praises of my fantastic farmers and to echo the pleas from the NFU:

“We want British agriculture to be the number one supplier of choice to shoppers in the UK and across the world. To achieve this, we stand ready to partner with government to build the British food brand at home and abroad and to ensure that, wherever possible, our schools, hospitals and military have access to fresh, high quality British food.”

I very much hope that the new Administration will ensure that we take further steps to deliver that. As part of that, I hope there will be further support and guidance for our smaller farmers—farms in Devon are nearer 60 hectares, which is smaller than the UK average of 85 hectares—to ensure that those smaller producers are able to optimise their food production in a sustainable way for the future, so that we can go on to enjoy British produce that much more and that much closer to home.

I had the privilege of leading the red meat debate not that long ago. I want to draw on some of those facts, because I think the work that has been done on the food strategy highlights the need for us to have a nutritious diet. However, the rush to replace our meat and dairy products with other items does not necessarily constitute either a healthy or an environmentally sustainable option.

There are currently 278 million dairy cows worldwide. We would only need 76 million if they were all as efficient as a UK cow. Eight litres of tap water are needed to produce one litre of milk, but 158 litres of tap water produce one litre of almond milk. Therefore, before we all rush for some more crushed avocado, we need to think about where those things have come from and the journeys they have made to get to our tables. A good British bacon sarnie might actually be the right breakfast choice. I hope that people will think about those choices, that we can see more red tractors on all our produce, and that we are able to help our fantastic British farmers deliver their fantastic British produce to our supermarkets and shops more readily.

Another factor to look at within British food is the high environmental standards that farmers currently operate to, not to mention the nutrient density of the products that we are eating. The complexities of food and the science around it are sometimes neglected behind

the media hype and the current fashions for Veganuary. As we move forward with the food strategy and the evolution of our farming industry to become even more sustainable and productive, I hope that we are able to find a healthy balance between people being able to make their own food choices and helping our fantastic British farmers do what they do best—produce fantastic British food.

2.26 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). She is in fact a vegetarian, so I am pleased to hear her talking about the benefits of eating meat.

I am proud to represent a constituency that produces fantastic, high-quality food—a lot of which is already sold through local retailers. The subject certainly resonates with farmers and growers, as I know from my regular discussions with them. Whenever the media comes across some new way of making food more local and more sustainably produced, inevitably one finds that farmers and producers are ahead of them and already doing it. Many of those businesses provided vital support to their communities during the pandemic. I thank them for that, and I promise them my support in what might be challenging times ahead.

In my constituency we have businesses such as Meonstoke Village Store and Westlands Farm Shop, which sell a wide range of locally sourced produce. We have Middle Farm Produce, a fantastic dairy farm in Cheriton, which has a vending machine so that people can buy directly in the most convenient way. We also have Reeve Butchers and Delicatessen in Clanfield, which makes fantastic sausages; Meon Valley Butchers in Wickham; Buckingham's Artisan Butchery in West Meon; and many others, selling excellent food.

That links with the real issue in local food—abattoirs. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) has already mentioned that. I realise that there are factors such as workforce availability, but the key challenge facing the sector is still regulation and Government support. If we want to reduce food miles and support local food, we must help abattoirs. They are facing increasing regulatory costs, which are disproportionately affecting smaller abattoirs. As the regulations increase, the margins reduce and prevent investment. If abattoirs cannot invest, modernise and update effectively, then the small, local abattoirs risk their entire existence. There has to be some recognition of their work and the role they play within local and small supply chains, because without them we will have no local supply chain. I shall be grateful if the Minister would look into that.

There is a frustrating stereotype that farming is somehow negligent or exploitative in how it produces food or manages the countryside. We should address that through education, as well as marketing in the food and farming sector. Getting the food from the farm to the fork with fewer stages and miles between the two points is not only environmentally beneficial, but an insurance against national or global supply chain disruptions. At present, I am hearing from everyone involved in food production, food service and retail about the increasing costs that

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

they are facing. The global challenge resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine has direct and local consequences for everyone, but I can assure everyone who is involved in food production in Meon Valley that they have my support and my thanks for everything that they have done to rise to the difficult challenges of recent years.

2.30 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate and I congratulate the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), on his appointment. It is one of those rare beast occasions when we have a round peg in a round hole. I am sure that he will be a Minister for agriculture.

In Thanet, we have Thanet Earth, which is probably the prime example of sustainable crop production in the United Kingdom. It is the largest greenhouse complex in Europe—at present, it is the size of about seven football pitches—and grows a variety of tomatoes under glass. It is highly successful and I think that it is blazing a trail, but—this is the “but”—most of the agriculture in the “Garden of England” and most of the agriculture in Thanet is still out in the open fields, or what is left of the open fields. That is my problem and the point that I will discuss.

We have two issues. One is the spread of solar farms on agricultural land, which is unsustainable and in my view unforgivable. There are acres of rooftop, acres of car parks and acres of public space on which solar farms can and should be put. They should not be put on agricultural land and I hope that practice will stop forthwith under the new Administration.

The second issue is agricultural policy. Our desire to be sustainable in food production is simply not compatible with our housing policy. I raised with the previous Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time some months ago the need for a moratorium on house building on agricultural land. In Thanet, we have grade one and grade two alluvial soil. It is some of the finest land in the country, but we are smothering it with houses.

The issue of water supply has also been raised today. The more we smother our agricultural land with housing, the more our aquifers, such as the Thanet aquifer, will dry up. Actually, that might not matter very much, because if we do not have any land to grow crops on, crops will not need watering.

All I want to say, and this really is all I want to say to my right hon. Friend the Minister today, is this: please can we get back to the days when the Ministry for Agriculture, as it then was, had a veto over change of use on agricultural land, and can we have a moratorium on building on agricultural land, so that we can grow the food that this country needs?

2.33 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). I agree with absolutely everything he said. The Campaign to Protect Rural England talks

about there being 1.3 million acres of brownfield sites across the UK, which plays well to his point that we should look at those sites and at buildings for solar panels rather than using green fields.

It is also a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing it. It is a timely debate, because of covid, the supply chain problems that we have had and the cost of living, and also because support for our farmers and our fishermen is absolutely essential. I pay tribute to the previous Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Neil Parish, for his work on this matter in the reports published by the Committee late last year. The work of that Committee has been absolutely tremendous and it has made a number of good suggestions.

I welcome the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), to his place. It is really welcome news that we have a farmer in that role; I know that my farmers are delighted he is there, and I hope that he will come down and visit us.

The subject of this debate cuts through to the very heart of localism in terms of our approach to and support for local businesses. Dare I say that I think we ought to be a little bit more French? It is not often that I am supportive of some of the measures that the French Government put in place, but one thing that can be seen in local communities across France is how they support local farmers and local producers within their communities—indeed, there are not as many supermarkets in the surrounding areas as are found elsewhere.

That French appetite for, interest in and manner of operating with their own farmers and fishermen must be replicated in the UK. We have been talking about localism for the last 12 years and we now have a real opportunity to implement it. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) discussed how we talk about food and how we encourage people to learn how to cook. Actually, an extraordinary number of opportunities for people to learn have already been provided by the private sector. There is a small group called Cookable, which helps people in schools and in workplaces by giving them better lessons on how to cook and how to have better engagement with the food they eat. On top of that, we have to think about how we educate people about the food they eat and where it comes from. What programmes can be put in place in schools to get children on to farms and fishing boats to ensure that people are more aware of the fact that the good-quality food we produce in this country is worth supporting and eating?

I will spend most of my time today talking about the south-west food hub. In 2014, David Cameron launched a plan for public procurement. The plan was that £1.2 billion worth of food should be bought by the public sector, improving standards. In response to that plan, the Crown Commercial Service committed to introducing a dynamic purchasing system to allow SMEs to register for Government contracts. In 2016, that was successfully piloted in Bath and north-east Somerset. The pilot demonstrated that food costs did not increase when buying from local SMEs, and it generated cost savings of 6% in the first year due to increased transparency and shorter supply chains.

Due to that pilot, the south-west food hub was selected by the Crown Commercial Services to do a scaled-up pilot. Unfortunately, the CCS has now reneged on its agreement with the south-west food hub and the hub has been dropped. That is a real mistake, because there is an opportunity here, with an organisation that is already set up, to build on two successful pilot schemes to ensure we get better local homegrown food into the stomachs of our constituents and on to the shelves of our shops. We have to have a long-term strategy about that. We are doing it for oil and gas and we are doing it for our energy infrastructure. Let us think about how we can do it for our food production and how we can support our farmers and fishermen.

It is interesting that in the Agriculture Act 2020 there is a requirement for the Secretary of State to come forward and talk about food security. I really hope that is going to happen this autumn—the time is now. It is a perfect opportunity for us to talk about how we can improve the self-sustainability of the United Kingdom, and our own food security. It is levelling up in the perfect form. It will not even cost us money.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Thank you to everyone for sticking to time. We come to the Front-Bench contributions. I would like to leave two minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to sum up.

2.37 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I commend the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate. His passion for the subject has always been clear in the time I have known him in Parliament. He started with some quite startling facts about the nine largest retailers controlling over 90% of the market in food, and the huge percentage of fish caught here that is processed off-shore and the impact that has. He also expressed some concerns about local food partnerships. We heard from other Members about the planning changes that are needed, and how £10 spent on a local box scheme means much greater spend in the local area. That point was well made. The need for a wider conversation about our food system was another important point.

I thank Sustain for its very useful briefing ahead of this debate. Much of it reflects what is going on in Scotland, where food policy is devolved. As I often do, I will share with Members some of what is already under way in Scotland. One of Sustain's recommendations is for all local authorities that do not have a food partnership to aim to start one, in collaboration with the Sustainable Food Places Network, by 2025. Scottish councils are well represented in that network; half of all our local authorities now have a food partnership and are members of Sustainable Food Places—with more to follow in the next few years.

Last year, the SNP Scottish Government ran a consultation on a local food strategy. It had three main themes: connecting people with food, connecting local producers with buyers, and harnessing the buying power of public sector procurement. Nearly 300 people participated in 18 workshops designed and co-ordinated by Nourish Scotland in partnership with Scotland's Sustainable Food Places Network and the Scottish Government. There was broad support from everyone

for local food, but a number of barriers were identified, some of which we have heard about today. They include a need for suitable infrastructure and short supply chains, for local food to be affordable and accessible for all, and for more land to be made available and accessible for those who wish to enter the market. There was also acknowledgment of the value of dynamic purchasing systems and the need to extend public sector procurement for local food to all publicly owned settings, which I note is one of Sustain's key recommendations. Work is now under way to address the key challenges identified, building on the ideas and suggestions made at that time, as well as relevant Scottish Government strategies and policies.

Underpinning that action is the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament in June. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that Act, which begins to lay the foundation for a transformation of Scotland's food system. It requires the Scottish Government and a range of public bodies to produce good food nation plans that are geared towards ensuring that high-quality, locally sourced food is affordable, accessible and a practical, everyday reality for everyone. An independent food commission will also be established which will scrutinise and make recommendations on those plans and give progress reports.

Alongside that, the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture, published in March, aims to transform how we support farming and food production to deliver nutritious food that is local and sustainably produced. Work is under way now with farmers, crofters and land managers to ensure that they have the right support to continue delivering high farming standards and to create more localised supply chains, enhance producer value and cut food miles. That ties in with the consultation on the forthcoming agriculture Bill at Holyrood, which covers a range of areas including promoting quality and sustainable food production, and ensuring a fair income for farmers and crofters, which is crucial.

Another tangible way in which the SNP Government are investing in and boosting the profile of local and regional produce is through the regional food fund, which awards projects grants of up to £5,000. Since its launch four years ago, the fund has supported an incredibly eclectic range of collaborative initiatives from all over Scotland. This year, 24 projects have been granted awards, from food and drink festivals and events to food tourism collaborations, and from online and physical markets to e-commerce. Regional food groups will deliver projects such as a "buy local" campaign from Eat and Drink Dundee, and a food heritage project by Lanarkshire Larder.

A number of hon. Members have made the point that harnessing local food is all the more crucial in the context of the cost of living crisis and the need to bolster our food security. This summer, the annual rate of inflation reached its highest level since 1982, and perhaps even before. Food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 12.6% higher in the year to July 2022. The research firm Kantar forecasts that the average annual grocery bill will rise by £380—a shocking figure. We know that low-income households are hit the hardest by price increases, as they spend a higher proportion than average of their income on energy and food.

[Deidre Brock]

Supply chain challenges, rising energy, fertiliser and transport costs, as well as labour shortages, have contributed to escalating prices. Although those problems have been exacerbated by Russia's war on Ukraine, our food security was already under threat. Recent years have seen an unfair burden placed on community organisations such as food banks, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted very effectively. The folks running those services do an utterly incredible job. I have to commend those operating food banks in my own constituency—they are providing lifeline support—but food banks are a symptom of a dysfunctional food and social security system.

The Scottish Government intend to incorporate the right to adequate food in Scots law. A draft national plan has been published to end the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity. Achieving that means focusing on tackling the causes of poverty holistically, through fair work, social security and helping to manage the cost of living. For instance, the SNP Government have used their limited powers to increase Scottish social security payments by 6%, and have just announced that they are increasing the Scottish child payment to £25 per child for those who are eligible. We urgently need a similar raise in reserved benefits. Another reserved area that we are greatly concerned about is the UK's pursuit of post-Brexit free trade deals, which is a subject that was well aired in the debate on the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill earlier this week.

I hope the Minister has heard the very sensible suggestions that Members have made, as well as their commitment and passion for local food production and the benefits it can bring. I hope he will take that forward in his new post.

2.45 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. For the second time today, I welcome the Minister to his place. His predecessor, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), always dealt in a thoughtful and dignified way with the constant questioning and assault that came her way, generally from her own side before I started. I wish her well in her new post.

I commend the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), with whom I have worked on many issues relating to the east of England. I hope I am not doing his career prospects too much harm by saying that I agreed very much with his introduction and many of the points he made. I associate myself with his observations about the shared prosperity fund, which I suspect we shall return to on other occasions, the role of the Grocery Code Adjudicator and the review of GSCOP.

I thank the organisations that have provided briefings. It is always dangerous to give a list in case somebody is missed, but I was particularly struck by the contributions by Sustain, the NFU, the Countryside Alliance and the 3F Group in the south-west.

We are having this discussion at a time when many of our constituents are suffering great anxiety about the food bills they face now and will face in the winter.

There are no two ways about it: the situation in terms of rising costs is serious. There is nothing more serious than the increasing number of people facing food poverty in the UK. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) for setting out the figures, and I make no apology for repeating them. The Food Foundation told us that, as of April, 7.3 million people, including 2.6 million children, were in food poverty, and in 2021-22 the Trussell Trust supplied 2.2 million three-day emergency food parcels to food bank users. Just yesterday, the Trussell Trust released a statement with details of a survey in August that estimates that more than 2 million people skipped meals across the previous three months to keep up with other essential costs.

Those are sobering numbers. With the cost of the family shop rising week by week, I fear that the number of those experiencing food poverty and relying on food banks will increase. Although we are all extraordinarily grateful to our local food banks—I pay tribute to all the volunteers and supporters in Cambridge—it cannot be right for the Government of a rich nation like ours to rely on them to feed people. As many others have observed, our role must really be to put food banks out of business by ensuring they are no longer needed.

A couple of weeks ago, I was pleased to meet Cambridge Sustainable Food and other local food poverty charities from across the county, which shared with me a public statement voicing that very concern. They said:

“Our member organisations are experiencing a perfect storm of increases in the numbers of people seeking help with food, often people who never expected to find themselves in this position, whilst donations of food and money are reducing as people are tightening their belts. We feel that the voluntary sector is plugging gaps in state provision for vulnerable households and worry that we will not be able to cope with rising demand”.

I wholeheartedly share their concerns.

Part of the solution will be supporting local food infrastructure, as other hon. Members have described well. Labour strongly supports such initiatives. On food security for local economies, there have been a number of reports showing that money spent on local food produce results in money staying in the local area and creates more jobs per pound than if that money were spent in the supermarket. The Sustain report in July 2021 found that for every £10 spend with a local food box scheme resulted in total spending of £25 in the local area, compared with just £14 when the same amount is spent in a supermarket.

On environmental concerns, we have heard a number of excellent examples of local food infrastructure working well in constituencies up and down the country. It has been a pleasure to hear details of those schemes from colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam.

In my constituency, CoFarm, run by founder and chief executive Gavin Shelton, is another great example. Established in 2019, it has since been successful in delivering several remarkable benefits to our local community, from tackling food insecurity to supporting the rebuilding of local biodiversity and ecosystems, as well as reducing health inequalities in an area of my city where life expectancy is 10 years lower than in the most affluent parts. I have been a regular visitor, and it is really impressive.

We know that the model of local food production works. We saw during the pandemic how local farms and local food infrastructure were able to respond to the needs of their local communities, and did so really well. Of course, that local food production will always sit alongside the wider food production system. It is not a replacement; it is complementary. It works for local economies, for the environment, and for people whose health is improved partly by the very act of participating—it really helps mental health. We want that model to be supported with Government investment, to ensure that more food can be sourced and eaten locally. As the agricultural support system is changing, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the fact that many of those small, local producers have never been supported by the systems that excluded those under five hectares. It may be time to revisit that.

There are many other things I could refer to, but in passing, I would like to pick up on some of the points made about local abattoirs. For instance, when one talks to people who want to return to mixed farming, it becomes pretty clear that it is very hard to do so without the local ability to raise livestock in the way those people would like. Sadly, I see from reading this week's *Farmers Guardian* that another one has just gone—Glossop-based Mettrick's.

Turning to the fishing sector, I very much associate myself with the comments made by the hon. Member for Waveney, and strongly commend his work with REAF. In my time as the shadow Fisheries Minister, I have been struck by the amount of fish that is driven around the country because we do not have local processing facilities, and how much more we could do—particularly with small fishers—to develop an important premium product that people would really like to have access to if we had the support to improve those facilities.

I am sure the Minister is aware that Labour's mantra has been to make, buy and sell more in the UK; I suspect he will hear more about it—endlessly—in the coming months. It has been very well received. The future Labour Government will ask every public body to give more contracts to British firms, and will pass legislation requiring them to report on how much they are buying from domestic sources with taxpayers' money, which we believe will help British farmers and local food producers.

We welcomed the Government's indication in their response to the national food strategy that they were moving in a similar direction; although we were, in general, disappointed with the response to the national food strategy, that was a glimmer of hope. However, that was the previous Government. Maybe today, the Minister can confirm to us whether that is still the intention, because in the Prime Minister's final hustings with the NFU on Friday, she rather suggested that she did not approve of top-down targets. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what the current thinking is.

We are committed to fixing the food system, in order to meet the health and environmental challenge identified by Henry Dimbleby in his national food plan; end the growing food bank scandal; ensure that all families can access healthy, affordable food; and improve our food security as a country. We want to buy, make and sell more here, and to make changes to public procurement so that our schools and hospitals are stocked with more

locally sourced, healthy food. Local food infrastructure will play a vital and important role in achieving all those things.

2.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): Mr Robertson, am I correct that I have until 3.08 pm to try to catch as many of those comments as I can?

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair) *indicated assent.*

Mark Spencer: I apologise now if I do not manage to respond to all the points that have been made.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing the debate. It is clear from the number of people who have taken the trouble to be in the Chamber today that lots of colleagues across the whole House are interested in this topic; it is a demonstration of how important this issue is, not only to Back Benchers but to the Government. I also thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for his kind words. That is twice he has given me kind words today—I am very much enjoying this honeymoon period. *[Interruption.]* I am sure it will not last too long.

First, it is worth pointing out that the food and drink industry is a vital cornerstone of our national economy. It contributes about £139 billion annually across all the agrifood and seafood sectors, and employs 4 million people. We are determined to have a productive, secure and resilient domestic food and drink sector, and we are supporting businesses to ensure that that is the case. We are rightly proud of our food and drink sector. We will always champion our farmers and producers and support them to grow, innovate and thrive. We have heard in the debate today various suggestions for how innovation can take place and how we can assist companies that operate in that sector to innovate.

The food strategy published earlier this year sets out how we can make the food we eat more sustainable and healthier for consumers, while maintaining the resilience of the supply chain and creating a prosperous environment for food and drink businesses across the whole country. The UK has had a highly resilient food supply chain, as demonstrated when we responded to covid-19 as a nation. It is worth pointing out that although there was enormous pressure on some food supply chains, at no point did the UK run out of food. Our food security report in December 2021 highlighted that. We are well equipped to deal with situations with the potential to cause of disruption.

Our high degree of food security is built on supply from diverse sources, including strong domestic production as well as imports through stable trade routes. We produce 61% of all the food we need, and we can grow 74% in the UK for most of the year. That draws me to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who talked about education and getting kids in schools to understand our food networks and how food is produced, and seasonality has a huge part to play in that. I know that some people in the food retail sector will be frustrated by customers that turn up on Christmas eve and say, "Why is there no UK asparagus?" Education of our consumers will play an important part in food resilience as we move forward.

[Mark Spencer]

Although the food supply chain is under some strain owing to multiple concurrent pressures, the sector has proven itself capable of keeping supply strong. We can expect that to remain the case over the winter months. However, it is worth pointing out that Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has had a massive impact on energy and food supplies across Europe. We are part of that global network and are feeling the winds of pressure from that invasion.

The Government have already taken action to support farmers. This year we pulled forward the basic payment schemes, so 50% of the payment has already gone out. There is a £37 billion package of support for households. The Government are determined to tackle the cost of living, and of course the House heard earlier from the Prime Minister as she set out further plans to support people through the coming months.

We have introduced a set of questions into the family resources survey to measure and track food bank usage, and DEFRA is working with delivery partners to tackle barriers to food redistribution. DEFRA continues to use regular engagement, working with retailers and producers to explore a range of measures so that they can ensure the availability of affordable food.

We are giving support to local food. SMEs are at the heart of the sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) said that 98% of small businesses are food and drink manufacturers. Such businesses often use local supply chains to source ingredients, with low food miles and championing sustainability. The Government are focused on helping these businesses grow, including through exporting, selling direct to consumers, accessing public sector procurement opportunities, and promoting their products at a regional level. That point goes right to the heart of the debate and the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney. Clearly, the infrastructure required to support that is vital.

Several colleagues mentioned the lack of abattoirs or fish processing in certain locations, but there is a reason to be optimistic. There are companies that are exploring mobile abattoirs as one concept that might be able to assist local markets to thrive and expand. As part of our support for these businesses, the Government hosted a regional food and drink summit in Birmingham in March. The summit successfully brought together SMEs and regional organisations to share best practice and access help to grow their businesses.

Following on from that, we are continuing to empower businesses and regional organisations to leverage growth opportunities, champion their regional food identity and develop links with local tourism, which will be holding a workshop later this year in the east of England—we would be delighted if my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney could attend and celebrate the fantastic food and drink from businesses in Suffolk and in his own constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) referred to tourism and to the beautiful landscape of North Devon—I had the privilege of taking my wife to the South Molton sheep sales—that probably says more about my performance as a husband than as a Minister—which was a recognition of those supply chains and how important they are to that local economy.

We recognise the importance of local sourcing. This was reflected in the Government's hospitality strategy published last year, which included a commitment to develop a blueprint for hospitality-led regeneration. Street food venues will be encouraged to connect with local food producers and reduce food miles and waste, boost employment, and grow local economies.

In addition to the Government's work, we recognise the role that local organisations play in supporting local food and drink. For example, the New Anglian Local Enterprise Partnership has funded a food enterprise park just outside Norwich. This is part of a plan to develop a food and drink cluster between Norfolk and Suffolk to facilitate growth in the agrifood sector and encourage food and drink production across the area. It is also vital that we work as united nations, that we co-operate with friends in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that those food production networks are easy to access and to celebrate. The food that is produced in those other parts of the United Kingdom will be vital to keep us all fed and healthy.

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

It is clear that local partners will continue to play a key role in growing local food, and we will be supporting and promoting food and drink businesses as we continue to work with these organisations to support local businesses and grow local economies. Supply chains form a crucial part of our local food infrastructure. The Government want all farmers to get a fair price for their products and we are committed to tackling contractual unfairness in the agrifood supply chain. There is a lot of debate about the Groceries Code Adjudicator—I sat on the original Bill that introduced it—but it has had an impact in making sure those in the retail sector conduct themselves in the right way.

We recognise the role that small abattoirs play in supporting local, rural economies. Representing a Nottinghamshire constituency, I can tell the Chamber that there is now no longer an abattoir in the whole county; farmers have to travel to access that sort of facility, and I know it is the same in many other counties. We are working with the Food Standards Agency and the Rural Payments Agency to streamline our administrative burdens, and our DEFRA industry small abattoir working group is engaging closely with the industry to ensure we take a strategic view of the issues facing the sector.

I raise the point of skills and labour. We know that labour is a critical part of our mission to support food producers, both nationally and locally. As announced in the Government's food strategy, we have commissioned an independent review to tackle labour shortages in the food supply chain. The review will continue, and will consider how automation may help. New technology may well be able to assist us as we move forward, and of course that brings its own economic opportunities, as we are able to develop new technology and market it around the world if it is proven to be successful. The food strategy also announced that we will release an extra 10,000 visas for the seasonal workers visa route, bringing the total to 40,000 visas for 2022.

There were a few comments made about land use, not least by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). Land use is going to rise up the political agenda. My right hon. Friend, and other

Members, will have heard the Prime Minister talk about the siting of solar panels on agricultural land. I share his view that the first priority should be to put solar panels on warehouses, schools and leisure centres before we take agricultural land out of food production. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes who referred to the large amount of brownfield sites around the country that should be used first for housing developments or those sorts of schemes.

There are lots of reasons to be optimistic. There are lots of opportunities for us as a nation to support our great food producers and lead the world in some of the technology that is available; we should certainly promote that around the world. I am hugely proud of our food and drink sector and I recognise the important role it plays up and down the country in rural areas. We will continue to engage with the industry to develop strong local food infrastructure and ensure that British food is recognised at home and abroad for its high quality and welfare. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for bringing this debate and look forward to his concluding comments.

3.6 pm

Peter Aldous: It is great to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. We have had a wide-ranging debate, so I will quickly go through some of the issues we have discussed. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) took me back nearly 40 years to one of my favourite films, “Trading Places”, which is all about speculation on the commodities market. That might have been funny, but she raised a serious point. With local supply chains and local food, we can insulate ourselves against such speculation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) reminded us that supply chains extend right into urban areas—they go a very long way. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) reminded us of the importance of water as an ingredient in the food infrastructure that we must provide for. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his own passionate way set out the importance of supply chains, reminding us how far those supply chains extend, and highlighted both the worries and distress caused by food insecurity and the great work of the Trussell Trust.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) promoted the importance of the British bacon sarnie—as a pig farmer, long may that continue. However, when we have that bacon sarnie, I sense that it might not be British bacon in there at the moment. We need to make sure we get back to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) reminded us of the support the food industry provided during the pandemic. Indeed, the industry is now very much stepping up to the plate so that we are well prepared for the cost of living crisis and the challenge over this coming winter.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who is probably the Member I have known longest in this House, very much welcomed the Minister as being a round peg in a round hole. My right hon. Friend also reminded me that—Father, I have sinned—we do have a solar farm on our farm, but he made his point well. I was a surveyor before I came to this place; in those days, it was much clearer cut. We knew what we could put and where. I sense that the planning system has got blurred at the edges, and we need to address that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) went all French, which I never thought would happen, but he made a good point. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) emphasised the importance of short supply chains; her point was made well, too. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), with whom I work very closely in an East Anglian environment, highlighted that local food production is a model that we can and should build on. He emphasised the environmental, economic and health reasons for that. He also reminded me of something I omitted: the great work done by care farms. In my constituency, we have the Pathways Care Farm; just outside it is the Clinks Care Farm. They are doing great work—in not only food production, but supporting people and getting them back on their feet.

Finally, it is great to see the Minister in his place. Let us swap the South Molton sheep sales for next year’s Suffolk Show.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of support for local food infrastructure.

Coastal Communities

3.10 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of coastal communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities, and in my capacity as the MP for the beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye, I am leading this debate on the future of coastal communities, and I am grateful for the support received from Members on both sides of the House.

Coastal communities are integral to the UK's environmental, social and economic wellbeing. The covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted on our coastal communities, exposing and exacerbating long-standing social and economic structural challenges, which need an urgent and co-ordinated response for there to be a sustainable recovery. Coastal communities are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with erosion and flooding posing an ever greater threat to both the built and natural environments.

We have long been a proud maritime nation and historically reliant on our coastal communities to help deliver national prosperity, but today too many of them face shared challenges and disproportionately high levels of deprivation. These communities have enormous potential, which can be unleashed with ambitious vision, partnership working and the right investment from both the public and private sectors. Both Labour and Conservative Governments have been alerted to the challenges of coastal communities over the years—lots of reports, but not enough real action.

In 2007, a Communities and Local Government Committee report on coastal towns highlighted the shared characteristics of coastal communities, including poor-quality housing, deprivation, the inward migration of older people, and the nature of coastal economies. The report said that coastal towns have too often been on the margins of central Government regeneration policy, with its focus on inner cities. The report led to the creation of the coastal communities fund.

Later, in 2019, the House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities published a report entitled “The future of seaside towns”, highlighting familiar challenges and making a number of recommendations. The challenges highlighted included the lack of transport connectivity, poor education standards and attainment, skill shortages, high levels of population transience and disproportionately high levels of people claiming sickness and disability benefits. The recommendations identified how regeneration could be supported in coastal towns, including through a dedicated source of funding specifically for coastal communities beyond the completion of the coastal communities fund.

We have seen that fund replaced with the UK shared prosperity fund, but it is disappointing that many coastal local authorities, such as Rother District Council and Hastings Borough Council, received the minimum amount of £1 million—a quarter of the amount received by inland Chorley in Lancashire, which received over £4 million, or Cannock Chase, which received over £3 million. Often the funding pots are competitive. The APPG for the south east, which I also chair, published a

report this year called “Financing the future—what does levelling up mean for South East England?” One of the report's recommendations is that levelling up must address the issue of short and long-term local government finance, with an emphasis on certainty and flexibility—not one-off and often competitive funding pots.

To really plan for the future of our coastal communities, we need long-term strategies and locally led plans. Improvements to coastal transport networks and targeted investment for school improvement programmes were also recommended in the Lords Committee report, hence my consistent campaigning for a faster service from London via Ashford, linking Rye, Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne not only to each other but to London. That is essential for better connectivity, which will in turn encourage and boost local employment opportunities and economic growth.

I welcome the new education investment area funding for East Sussex—Hastings has been designated a priority education investment area—but we must do more. Education and skills are vital tools in social mobility and are essential for economic wellbeing and social inclusion. It is vital for economic growth that education and skills evolve with the needs of the modern labour market. In that regard, our coastal communities have enormous potential in terms of the green revolution, but they are not being given the focus needed to unleash that potential and become a greater resource for the UK.

In 2020, the Office for National Statistics produced a significant study of coastal communities. It highlighted what we already know about the challenges, including the prevalence of deprivation, slower employment and population growth—even a decline—and an ageing population. A poll commissioned by Maritime UK revealed that coastal communities are set to lose 49% of their young people amid employment concerns. Jobs were cited as the overwhelming reason why Maritime UK and the Local Government Association coastal special interest group jointly published their “Coastal Powerhouse Manifesto” in September last year, urging the Government to form a coherent plan for the coast and highlighting a number of areas in which action must be taken to catalyse investment, level up coastal communities and realise the potential of all the UK's coastal regions.

To date, coastal regeneration funding has largely focused on heritage, recreational and arts projects. Those are important, but further specific action is clearly required to generate higher wages and higher-skilled jobs. Maritime UK's “Coastal Powerhouse Manifesto” sets out proposals to extend freeport benefits to all coastal areas, boost connectivity to the rest of the country, develop new skills in coastal communities and install a shore power network across the coast to provide the infrastructure to charge tomorrow's electric vessels. It is also worth noting the research and recommendations of the KMPG and Demos report “Movers and Stayers: Localising power to level up towns”, which was published in July.

Most pertinently, last year, Professor Chris Whitty published his annual report on health disparities in coastal communities. Life expectancy, healthy life expectancy and disability-free life expectancy are all lower in coastal communities. The standardised mortality ratios for a

range of conditions, including preventable mortality, are significantly higher. Life expectancy at birth in Central St Leonards ward in my constituency is 11.2 years lower for males, and 8.7 years lower for females, than in Crowborough North East in the rural, more affluent Wealden district.

Such case studies consistently emphasise that coastal communities face not only challenges with the recruitment and retention of health and social care staff, but knock-on challenges with service delivery. Last week, I visited the Parchment Trust, a local charity in Hastings that provides occupational and day-care services for people with learning and physical disabilities. Those at the trust do amazing work, but they struggle with recruiting and retaining staff—largely because of the pay they can offer. East Sussex County Council, which commissions services from the trust, has limited resources but an above-average population of elderly people and people with social care needs, and that is not reflected in local authority funding formulas.

Professor Whitty clearly outlines in his report that tackling the underlying drivers of poor health—including deprivation, poor educational attainment, housing, alcohol and/or substance misuse, homelessness and rough sleeping, underdeveloped transport infrastructure and a lack of diversity in jobs and coastal economies—and focusing proportionate and appropriate NHS and care resources to provide for physical and mental health and social care needs will help to prevent ill health in the long term. That will benefit not just our coastal communities but the whole UK.

High levels of deprivation, driven in part by major and long-standing challenges with local economies and employment, are important reasons for the poor health outcomes in these communities. Tackling deprivation is key, and although the levelling-up White Paper articulates how policy interventions will improve opportunity and boost livelihoods across the country, it does not specifically target coastal communities. For the Government's spending, taxation, investment and regeneration policy to bring about meaningful changes in these communities, they must be at the heart of the Government's levelling-up plans.

However, we must not focus solely on the challenges facing coastal communities, because they also offer fantastic and unique opportunities. Coastal communities have unleashed nature-based potential both on land and in our oceans—for renewable energy industries and in the fight against climate change, which can also drive social and economic benefits. Our coasts and seas contain some of the UK's most varied ecosystems, and investing in coastal restoration and adaptation projects offers low-income coastal communities opportunities that yield financial returns on investments, create jobs, stimulate local economies and regenerate and revitalise the health of our ecosystems.

We might look, for example, at the work my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is doing with the Sussex Wildlife Trust on restoring the kelp forest off the coast of Worthing, which is helping to capture carbon. Restoring and maintaining blue carbon habitats in our seas could create jobs directly in conservation, as well as indirectly in nature-based tourism, helping to level up our coastal communities even further.

Coastal communities have their own distinctive and unique role to play in our regional and sub-regional economies, as well as in the national one. We must ensure that all places create and share in prosperity, so that everyone has the opportunity to enjoy a higher quality of life. If given the necessary social, economic and environmental support and investment, our coastal communities can be an even greater national resource, rather than a problem requiring a solution. It is therefore vital that levelling up recognises the unique challenges that coastal communities face and responds to them with meaningful policy action. It is also vital that this Government recognise the unique opportunities that coastal communities present to us economically, environmentally and socially and respond to them with meaningful policy action.

To address the challenges and exploit the opportunities of coastal communities, we need a dedicated Minister for coastal communities who can work across Government, supported by a national strategy for coastal communities and the reinstatement of a cross-departmental working group for the coast. This much-needed recognition and investment from the Government will help to secure the future of the coast and generate improved economic resilience and environmental sustainability through creating better connectivity, economic diversity and stronger communities and by restoring pride in our coastal identity as an island nation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. There are actually quite a few more people standing than submitted to speak through the Speaker's Office, so I am afraid I will have to impose a time limit of three and a half minutes with immediate effect. We will see how that goes—it might shrink further.

3.23 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I have the great pleasure of representing Wirral West, which forms the north-western part of the Wirral peninsula. The coastal towns and villages of Meols, Hoylake, West Kirby, Caldy and Thurston offer stunning views across the Dee estuary to Hilbre island and the Welsh hills in the distance, or out across Liverpool bay to Crosby, Formby and Southport. It is an area well known for the opportunities it provides for sport and leisure activities, both for local people and people from much farther afield.

Last Saturday, I visited the Royal National Lifeboat Institution station in Hoylake for the West Kirby and Hoylake RNLI meet and greet day. It was a fantastic event, and provided the opportunity for visitors to climb on board the lifeboat and the hovercraft, explore the lifeboat station and meet the staff and volunteers. I heard about the rescues they perform, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the immense courage, selflessness, skill and strength that they show in saving lives at sea. The RNLI is massively important to the local community, which supports it a great deal and is rightly proud of the work it does. Standing in the lifeboat station and looking out across the beach caused me to reflect on the wide range of water sports and activities that take place there, including walking dogs

[Margaret Greenwood]

on the beach, riding horses, going out to Hilbre island to look at the seals, sailing, kayaking, paddleboarding and so forth.

The coast is a fantastic amenity for locals and visitors alike, and it is heavily reliant on one key ingredient: the sea. The quality of water matters, but it is at risk from sewage. I am concerned that it may now also be at risk from industrialisation, because this morning the Prime Minister announced that she will lift the moratorium on extracting shale gas. My constituents will be extremely concerned about that announcement.

The natural world is immensely important to the character of Wirral West. Back in 2013, under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government, a conditional licence was granted for underground coal gasification in the Dee estuary. Like fracking, it is a risky technology for extracting fossil fuel. I have led a campaign against UCG in the Dee since 2013, and public opposition to the industrialisation of the Dee off West Kirby and Hoylake is extremely strong. The estuary is a site of special scientific interest and a place of international importance for bird life. It is important that we protect the quality of the ecosystem, so my constituents will be alarmed by the Prime Minister's announcement this morning. I call on the Government to think again, restore the ban on fracking and put in place an outright ban on UCG too.

Sewage is also of great concern. One of my constituents wrote to me about her experience of kayaking. She said that she

"noticed a horrible scum on the water",

which entered her kayak. She added that

"the evidence of raw sewage was obvious".

Given that the Prime Minister was responsible for cutting millions of pounds of funding earmarked for tackling water pollution during her time as Environment Secretary, people have every right to be concerned that the Government will not take this issue seriously.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I do not have enough time, so I will carry on.

I ask the Minister to respond to that point. The Government recently published their storm overflows discharge reduction plan, but although it appears to provide for an increase in the monitoring of overflows, the question remains whether the Environment Agency and Ofwat will then use that data to take tough action. I call on the Minister to set out how the Government intend to address sewage on our beach, UCG and fracking.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I ask Members not to take interventions, because we are up against time.

3.27 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for her excellent speech and for bringing forward this debate. I reiterate her request for a coastal Minister,

as the issues we experience around the coast are unifying. As we look to level up this great country under the new Administration, I very much hope that we can move away from the north-south divide and level up around the coast.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) did not take my intervention, but I also represent a very beautiful coastal constituency and I have been concerned about water quality this summer. It is very important that we recognise the difference between algal blooms and sewage discharge. My constituency has not had sewage discharge this summer, but we have had significant algal blooms due to the heat.

I do not want to focus on sewage today. I want to use the opportunity of having the levelling-up Minister here to talk about coastal communities and the issues that are particularly prevalent in the Devon and Cornwall peninsula following the pandemic, with the immense shortage of affordable housing that our local residents can move into and purchase.

Our beautiful area has seen a surge in short-term holiday lets and the second homes market. I very much hope that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport consultation on holiday lets registration goes ahead. I also hope that there are opportunities in the Minister's Department to impose planning restrictions to reduce the number of holiday lets that come to market. When new properties are built, a change of use should be required if they are to become a short-term holiday let. Communities such as mine need homes for people to live and work in. We love our tourists and we would never want to stop them coming, but our housing market has got completely out of balance.

In North Devon, we are not the most productive, unfortunately, and our wages are really very low. Full-time workers in North Devon currently earn £13.29 per hour, while the south-west average is £14.67 and the Great Britain average is £15.65. Our property prices have shot up by over 22%. We are the second fastest growing property price area in the country, but our house building rate has not grown that much and the vast majority of what is being sold is going in the form of second homes or holiday lets. If this continues, we will no longer have coastal communities; we will have winter ghost towns. We need urgent intervention through the levelling-up White Paper to tackle the issue.

Ilfracombe in my constituency is regularly defined, unfortunately, as being home to the poorest wards in the whole of Devon, and among the 5% poorest wards in the entire country. The issues in towns such as Ilfracombe have been documented for decades, yet we seem unable to grasp the fact that these things are happening all the way around our coast. Each coastal MP will have similar stories to mine. Life expectancy for people in Ilfracombe is 10 years less than that for those in the south of the county.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Selaine Saxby: Unfortunately, I must not—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We are not taking interventions, and the time limit is about to vanish.

Selaine Saxby: I will end by saying again that I hope that, in addition to the establishment of a coastal Minister, we should reinstate the coastal communities fund, so that these fantastic places to live and work can continue to be just that.

3.30 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this important debate.

For too long, the specific needs of our coastal communities have been neglected and their voices continue to be ignored. Many of our once proud resorts are tired and lacking in investment, while many people are locked into low-paid, no-prospect jobs.

Along the north-east coast, we have a particular problem that is devastating our marine ecosystem and the fishing industry from Hartlepool to Whitby, as well as hitting tourism. Dead crustaceans and other wildlife continue to be washed up on our shores, and the catches of many local fishermen are down by 90%. Some have told me about their catches. One put down 1,100 pots but caught only seven velvet crabs; he told me that he would normally catch thousands a day. A father and son went out fishing recently and had their worst day ever. Normally, they would have caught 80 kg of lobster and 250 kg of crab. Instead, they caught 5 kg of lobster and 30 kg of crab—less than 10% of their usual haul. Of the catches that are secured, I am told that buyers are now turning elsewhere and prefer to buy from areas further south, because too many of the crustaceans in our area are weak or already dead.

In a Westminster Hall debate that I secured at the end of June, I was told by the then Minister, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), that this issue would remain at the very top of the Government's agenda, but clearly that is not the case. At a time when fishermen are already feeling the economic bite of declining catches and reduced economic opportunities, they have had to fork out from their own pockets and crowdfund investigations in order to try to understand what was happening. They commissioned Tim Deere-Jones, an independent marine pollution consultant with 30 years of experience, who said that there is "no empirical evidence" for the Government's preferred algal bloom theory as the cause of the problem. Instead, he suggested that the cause is linked to the chemical pyridine, because the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' own data indicated that quantities of it were over 70 times higher in crab samples taken from Saltburn and Seaton than in a control sample from Penzance.

I know that the results of an independently led university investigation will soon be available, but I can advise the House today that its very early results appear to support the pyridine theory. Our coastal community believes that this warrants further, comprehensive investigations by the Environment Agency into the presence of pyridine in the Tees and the possible consequences of that for marine life. I ask the agency to engage even more with our local universities when the report comes out.

Many believe that dredging is resulting in dangerous substances entering the sea and the Government will be aware that there is considerable anxiety locally about dredging in connection with the Teesworks development,

which we all want to succeed. In a statement about the dead crustaceans, the South Tees Development Corporation said that

"all official scientific investigations to date have ruled out dredging" as the cause of the problem. However, in a Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science report about the South Bank Quay dredging, its officer notes that

"the data reviewed from previous studies and from desk-based sources provide an understanding of the shellfish features in this region, although it is acknowledged that these data do not represent the exact area potentially being impacted by the present project."

Our sea is dying. I need the Government to tell us what they will do to find out exactly what is causing it and what they will do about it.

3.34 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing this important debate on the future of coastal communities and for her excellent suggestion that there should be a Minister for coastal communities. I will add that an island Minister would be good, too.

I will address three points: why coastal communities are special, why they need support, and how we can support them. I represent Ynys Môn, the isle of Anglesey, a unique and beautiful place. We have a huge seasonal tourist industry. It is a fabulous place to visit, and I encourage all to do so. Indeed, it is such a special place that my Ynys Môn constituency will have protected status at the next general election, something for which I successfully fought.

However, the Anglesey that visitors see in the summer is not the Anglesey that local people experience year round. Outside the holiday season, many shops and restaurants shut their doors, or struggle through, and the further across the island one travels from the mainland, the harder those challenges become. We have one of the lowest rates of gross value added of any constituency in the UK.

Holyhead, where I live, is the second busiest ro-ro port in the UK, and a major route to Ireland. It sits at the far end of Anglesey and contains some of the most deprived areas in the UK, but it needs a different response from similarly deprived inland areas. To visualise why, take a map and draw a circle of 5-mile radius around Holyhead: over three quarters of that is sea. Now, I like fish, but they do not set up businesses, they do not employ people and they do not provide aspirational role models for our young people. Our towns once had bustling town centres. Holyhead used to have not one but two Clarks shoe shops, and now it has none. The loss of major employers such as Wylfa and Anglesey Aluminium has decimated local employment, which is why so many people end up in low-paid seasonal jobs, or leave to seek careers elsewhere—draining our communities and taking away our precious Welsh language and our culture.

How can we support coastal communities and give them a thriving future, with opportunities for local young people to stay, work and raise families? We need to recognise that coastal communities face unique

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

challenges and deserve targeted support. I recently supported Isle of Anglesey County Council's levelling-up fund bid for £17 million to regenerate Holyhead town centre. That investment would put the town centre back in the hands of the community, funding heritage projects to attract locals and visitors, supporting new businesses and offering secure, quality employment to our young people. However, the criteria for general funds, such as the levelling-up fund, usually give no specific weight to the special needs of coastal communities. The way to secure the future for coastal communities is to recognise their unique needs and provide targeted support. The young people of Ynys Môn deserve the same local opportunities as those in other parts of the UK.

I have spoken about why coastal communities are special, why they need support and how we can support them. I am honoured to represent Ynys Môn. The people of Ynys Môn put their trust and faith in me, and it is a privilege and responsibility that I take very seriously. Anglesey is also my home. It is one of the best constituencies in the UK. My father had to leave Wales to find work; I am working hard to ensure that young people right across Anglesey have a future, and that that future is on Anglesey, a coastal island community. *Diolch yn fawr.*

3.37 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on introducing the debate. I am a Member for a coastal constituency. Indeed, I live a stone's throw away from the breathtaking view of Strangford lough. I enjoy the animal life and the majesty of the coast, but I also have first-hand experience of the pitfalls of coastal erosion. That is what I want to focus on.

Moneys have been allocated from Westminster to Northern Ireland in the past for coastal erosion. Professor Andrew Cooper and Professor Derek Jackson stated in 2018:

"A strategic approach to shoreline management is urgently needed to address the challenges of marine flooding and erosion: current shoreline management is reactive and poorly structured and continuation of current practice will lead to coastal degradation and loss of amenity value. There is an absence of adequate information on which to base coastal decision-making."

With that in mind, we cannot even quantify the issues unless we have the information on how the coast works: the rates of change, the sources of coastal material, the patterns of sand movement, the impact of storms and post-storm recovery along the coastline. Establishing a coastal observatory for Northern Ireland is critical for us. I very much look forward hearing from the Minister, and I wish her well in her role. It is my desire that the moneys set aside for levelling up will help us in Northern Ireland to develop this conversation, and develop strategic action that we can take part in.

Being part of a coastal community does not just mean that we get fresh sea air, which we do. It does not just mean that we have great views, which we do. It means more than that. It can also mean being socially isolated. A journey that is no problem for those who can nip on a local bus in town to a hospital appointment can become an all-day excursion for those who live in a

rural area. Those are the issues of isolation and the problems that need to be addressed in any approach to coastal communities.

Coastal towns are more likely to have higher levels of deprivation—I know that that is the case in Northern Ireland. They are also prone to be home to older generations. For instance, 30% of the resident population in small seaside towns were aged over 65 in 2018, compared with only 22% in small non-coastal towns. That is replicated in my constituency of Strangford. The fishing village of Portavogie, which the shadow spokesperson for the Scots Nats, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), visited some time ago, once had two fish-producing factories, as well as hundreds of fishing crew, but now we have a fraction of those jobs, and we are still seeking the post-Brexit economic boom.

The coastal communities fund has done some tremendous work supporting funding for volunteers and employment opportunities for vulnerable people, parents and families returning to education. It can help restore tourist attractions, business units creating employment and an environmental apprenticeship scheme. My constituency has seen some of those small things happening with the restoration of the Ballywalter lime kilns in my constituency and with sporting projects.

Looking to the future, the Minister, who is responsible for this and for helping us in Northern Ireland, should speak in favour of a holistic, UK-wide approach to ensure that every community feels the warmth of the coastal fund and any improvement scheme.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): There is a new time limit of three minutes, and the first person who is going to use that brilliantly is Robin Millar.

3.41 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Thank you, I think, Dr Huq. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I also thank the other hon. Members present for their contributions; there have been too many for me to refer to in my own short speech. Finally, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate, and on her valuable work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities.

The UK has some of the most beautiful coastal settings in the world, and I am proud that Aberconwy is among them. However, although coastal communities are full of wonderful things and remind us of holidays on the beach, eating ice creams and enjoying the British summer weather, they are no stranger to complex challenges. During recent decades, our coastal communities have disproportionately topped the list of those areas in the United Kingdom most vulnerable to economic and environmental changes and shocks.

Just as much as Aberconwy has the beauty, charm and heritage of our coastal communities, it faces many of the challenges, and they have been compounded by the current energy crisis. That link is where I will focus my remaining remarks. I welcome the Government's statement this morning, ensuring that the average household in Aberconwy will pay no more than £2,500 per year for their energy bills for the next two years from October.

I also welcome the support that will be provided to businesses over the next six months. The interventions ease fears, protect jobs and promote growth.

In north Wales we have some of the most expensive electricity supply costs in the UK. At the same time, we have vast potential to produce clean energy and reduce energy costs. We can secure our energy and reduce energy prices in the long term through addressing that. I welcome the Government's support and commitment to maximise energy production, such as nuclear and renewables, to make the UK a net energy exporter by 2040.

We are familiar with energy production in Aberconwy. Tidal range has the capacity to deliver predictable, large-scale generation with none of the problems of intermittence associated with other renewable technologies. The proposed north Wales tidal lagoon would have a generating capacity of more than 2 GW, create 20,000 jobs, generate clean electricity reliably for a century, and provide protection to our exposed coastline.

Such a scheme and the new nuclear power station at Wylfa mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) offer long-term and sustainable economic benefits for our north Wales coastal communities. They offer the potential of transformative investment, providing constituents and communities with security and hope for the future. They generate both economic resilience and environmental sustainability in the long term. They go way beyond short-term relief and tax-and-spend economics. They exemplify investment for growth and are a long-term solution to much more than the challenges of energy. They can deliver for our nation and, more importantly, for our valuable and vulnerable coastal communities.

3.44 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a privilege to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I represent Waveney, the most easterly constituency in the United Kingdom. Lowestoft, the principal town, was formerly the fishing capital of the southern North sea. Unfortunately, over the last 40 to 50 years, the economy has declined significantly and we have deep pockets of deprivation, which are exacerbated by the current cost of living crisis. However, the community is coming together to support those people who will face real challenges and hardship in the course of the next few months.

I want to emphasise that there is cause for optimism. CEFAS has its headquarters and labs in the town, and they are being refurbished and rebuilt. East Coast College has opened the energy skills centre, ready for the renewables opportunities off our coast. The Gull Wing bridge—the long-awaited third crossing—is under construction, as is the Lowestoft flood defence scheme. We are about to start work on various town deal initiatives. Over the last three years there has been public investment of £250 million in the local town. That is very important, and I sense it is going to bring about meaningful change, with an economy based on renewables, energy and a revived fishing industry, as well as tourism and leisure.

I want briefly to highlight three issues where coastal communities do lose out. They relate to Government funding. The first is education funding. Suffolk is a member of the F40 group—it is not a group to be proud to be a member of—which is made up of the 40 local education authorities that receive the lowest amount of funding from Whitehall. Coastal communities have real educational challenges. That iniquity needs to be addressed. On local government funding, Suffolk, like many coastal communities, is a two-tier county authority. Suffolk receives £310 per head, compared with the £560 per head received by metropolitan areas, and the £729 per head for inner London. Those issues need to be addressed. Similarly, our enterprise zone needs to be rebalanced and reallocated land. I am sure that I will take that up with the Minister in due course.

3.47 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. Having been relieved of my ministerial duties just a few hours ago—shortly after responding to your question in the Chamber this morning—I could not resist the opportunity to contribute to this debate on my return to the Back Benches. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate, just so that I could return to speaking after a while of not being able to do so.

I represent a constituency with two coasts—it is one of only three such constituencies in the whole country—so the matter of coastal communities is very close to my heart. Representing a Cornish constituency, I find that very often the image portrayed of life in Cornwall is idyllic. The series running at the moment on Channel 4, “Finding the Cornish Dream”, is a slightly warped version of what life is actually like for many people in Cornwall, because there is no doubt that coastal communities in Cornwall are among the most disadvantaged in our country. That is why it is so important that we have debates such as this, and that we continue to remind the Government of the importance of supporting our coastal communities to ensure that they can thrive and be prosperous in the future.

I add my voice to those calling for a Minister for coastal communities. Just after the last election, I had a discussion with the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), about the need to put in place a Minister for coastal communities. I actually volunteered to take that role, but unfortunately the pandemic took over and we never managed to conclude that discussion. Perhaps the new Prime Minister would like to consider appointing a Minister for coastal communities, and if she really needs someone to do it, I am more than happy to return to Government.

There are a number of challenges that we need to face in supporting our coastal communities. We are too heavily reliant of tourism and hospitality, as important as that sector is. Much of our employment is seasonal, so we need to help our coastal communities to diversify their economic opportunities. I say to the Minister that one thing that should be done for coastal communities in Cornwall is address the biggest issue that we face—that of housing. Housing is unaffordable for most local people. The impact of the pandemic on the holiday let market and the increase in the number of holiday lets

[Steve Double]

mean that too many people in Cornwall cannot find anywhere to live. Businesses are affected because they cannot find staff, because people are willing to come and work in Cornwall but cannot find anywhere to live. I know the Government are consulting on what to do about holiday lets, but I urge the Minister to make it a priority and ensure the Government act on holiday lets, so that local people in Cornwall can find somewhere to live.

3.50 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and I thank my near neighbour my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). Three minutes is not enough time to do justice to the beauty of my coastal community, but Debussy composed “La Mer” there, so I will rest there. Nor is it enough time to do justice to some of its challenges, so I will focus on just two aspects: climate change and transport. I put it to the Minister that therein lie both opportunity and threat, and it is all about the sea.

Those rising sea levels have caused consternation and concern and have inspired quite ambitious plans from the Environment Agency. Eastbourne will potentially see the most ambitious coastal defence scheme rolled out across the land, with over £100 million of investment to secure the town’s future. I thank the Minister for her and her predecessor’s work on this particular issue because within that vital defensive work there are countless opportunities to add value and bring about regeneration. Whether in aquaculture and new visions for growing kelp and mussel beds or in safety, lighting and access to the seafront, there are many opportunities for us to exploit, so I look forward to continuing to work with DEFRA on that enormously important scheme.

Coastal communities rise or fall by their transport connectivity. As my hon. Friend said, there have been many reports and much good work has been done in Eastbourne on roads, rail and air. I put on the record the absolutely driving need for road investment on the A27, for the high-speed rail signalled by my hon. Friend to connect us to London, the north and the continent, and for Gatwick’s second runway, which is hugely significant for a coastal community that is dependent on tourism.

I have managed to confine myself to just six specific asks in my remaining time. There should be an emphasis on that fairer funding formula. Eastbourne actually has an average age of 45—contrary to *Daily Mail* reporting—but we have a high percentage of older people, and we need that enhanced level of funding to provide social care. There should be active promotion with Visit England for the year of the coast 2023. I echo my earlier points on transport. VAT was defining previously; it could be again. There should be a Minister for the coast, because the issue crosses all Departments—Health, Transport, Business, Treasury. It could be a strategic post.

3.53 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing the debate. Although

I no longer represent a coastal community, my constituency borders such communities and many of my constituents work in them and rely on their economic, cultural and social success. I also wrote a chapter called “Coastal Communities in the 21st Century” in the 2019 book “Britain Beyond Brexit”, edited by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman).

My first point is that coastal communities are diverse in population and economy size, and there is no one size fits all. Communities in Cornwall and North Devon are very different from those in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Member for Hastings and Rye and for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell). However, they do have one thing in common: the Government’s productivity drivers and initiatives on skills, innovation, competition, enterprise and investment work less well in coastal communities. That is largely due to the hub-and-spoke nature of the UK’s infrastructure, as resources are focused on the major arterial routes out of large conurbations.

Since the book was published, we have had the covid pandemic. That has meant that digital connectivity has been an issue in many areas, not least remote coastal communities where the problems are not only with broadband but with mobile coverage, as many people on holiday in Cornwall—including myself—have found. However, working from home has increased dramatically, so improving digital connectivity is one of the most cost-effective ways of providing incentives for businesses and people to move out of central conurbations and into coastal communities.

I believe that transport is the largest barrier for coastal communities. Those communities are often at the end of the line, meaning that cars are the only way to get around. It takes the same amount of time as in the Victorian era to get a train from London to many coastal communities, which is not good enough. Even to places such as Portsmouth, it still takes one hour and 40 minutes to travel 70 miles by train. The fastest time from London to Great Yarmouth is two hours and 38 minutes to travel just 136 miles, and Newquay in Cornwall—only 256 miles away—is just under five hours by train. By contrast, it takes two hours to travel the 200 miles between Manchester and London, and from Birmingham, it takes one hour and 29 minutes to go 126 miles. Members can imagine how galling it is to hear about HS2 train times if you live by the sea.

It is just as bad to travel between coastal communities, too. It takes two hours and 40 minutes to travel the 58 miles between Great Yarmouth and Felixstowe; sometimes, it is possible to cycle those routes faster. That is the crux of it—poor transport links and poor digital connectivity are two very negative forces pushing down on our coastal communities. One is, sadly, very expensive to fix; one is much cheaper, so I hope that Government policy is directed towards digital connectivity and bringing coastal communities into the 21st century. That would at least take one negative away while longer-term transport solutions are found.

3.56 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate. I pity Members of Parliament who do not get to represent coastal communities: along

my 58 miles of coastline, I am fortunate to have large towns such as Brixham, Salcombe and Dartmouth, as well as the surrounding villages. It is a bit of a mixed bag: in Brixham, we see huge opportunity coming through a growing fishing sector that had a record year last year and is on course to have a record year this year. It sends much of its fine produce up to Grimsby and the processing plants there, which is very welcome. However, to make that opportunity go further, we need to ensure that Brixham secures funding from the levelling-up fund, which will enlarge the harbour and support the high-tech businesses that are based there, such as the photonics industry.

One of the biggest problems I see in my patch is that of GPs and rural healthcare. Far too many minor injury units and cottage hospitals are closing, and too many GPs are unable to give as much access to residents as necessary; access to dentists is also poor. We need to look at how we roll out better rural healthcare, a point that is most keenly felt in coastal communities. The point about bus routes, which has already been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), is well placed: we have terrible transport links at the moment. We need to make good use of the reduction in bus fares that has just been announced by the Government, which is going to take place in January and last for three months, with low-price fares to encourage people back on to the transport networks. It is a chicken-and-egg scenario: the only way we are going to get more bus routes is by getting more people to use buses in the first instance.

My third point is about fishing and aquaculture. Since all Members present are coastal MPs, I encourage them all to join the all-party parliamentary group for shellfish aquaculture, because aquaculture can increase opportunities within our coastal communities, as well as help to sequester carbon and produce sustainable food. One of the largest mussel farms in Europe is off my coastline, and it is doing extraordinary work.

Finally, turning to the point that was so well made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), housing is a big problem. In Salcombe, the average house price is £800,000, so there are no homes available for local people, and the story is similar in Brixham and in Dartmouth. We need to build houses with covenants—houses that are there for local people at locally affordable rents—and we need to do so quickly, because quite frankly, my communities are being hollowed out by those extraordinarily high prices. There is a lot to do, and I know that as a group, we can work on a cross-party basis to make sure we get the very best for our communities.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Finally from the Back Benches, Natalie Elphicke.

3.59 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this important debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as an unremunerated director of the not-for-profit Housing and Finance Institute, which has put forward a strong case for coastal renaissance in its "Turning the Tide" research paper.

We are an island nation, so it is somewhat surprising that so many policies, and the funding that goes with them, appear better designed to support our big cities than to support our coastal towns and villages. Coastal communities have a different design and construct from other areas. They are sometimes described as the end of the line, but in Dover and Deal we like to say, "Welcome to the beginning of Britain". However, that end-of-the-line thinking dominates Whitehall. It is extremely damaging to the allocation of much-needed infrastructure investment, and to business, as whole swathes of business opportunities are moved to the so-called central belt in the midlands or even further north.

My constituency is the gateway to and from the European continent, and it is vital that investment in it is supported through its continued and future growth, which will benefit the country as a whole. For Dover and Deal, that means investment in the A2 upgrade, which is part of the roads investment programme, in port health and in port border infrastructure, which is the subject of a levelling-up bid from Kent County Council, and in our people through the education and skills necessary to make the most of the opportunities that have arisen since we left the European Union, and to reflect a modern, digital and creative economy. That is the subject of a second levelling-up bid, led by Dover District Council, and I commend both bids to the Minister.

In the time I have remaining, I will focus on coastal community deprivation. In the 2015 deprivation indices, more than two thirds of the 30 most deprived small areas were in coastal communities, and nine of the 10 most deprived small areas were in seaside places. Rolling forward to the snapshot of the latest available figures, which are from 2019, 25 of the 30 most deprived small areas are in coastal communities, and all of the top 10 are in our small coastal areas.

A notable feature of coastal communities is a high incidence of the private rented sector, as well as a lack of new or affordable housing. The proportion of private rented sector housing increases in a gradient across all the quartiles as the average multiple deprivation score increases. Additionally, there is a significant incidence of poor-quality housing, which has a causative effect on other indices of deprivation. Prioritising our coastal communities and their housing is essential. Policymaking needs to move on from the Victorian industrial focus and focus on our modern age.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): If our three Front Benchers keep to nine minutes each, Sally-Ann Hart will get to sum up at the end.

4.2 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and I shall do my best to stick within the guidelines that you have given. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing the debate. I understand that she hails originally from Northumberland, a county that has a particularly special place in my heart, not least because it is where I have my earliest memories of seaside holidays in places such as Berwick-upon-Tweed and Seahouses. It is certainly a place that means a great deal to me.

[Richard Thomson]

Throughout the debate we have heard a great deal about Members' huge affection for our coastal communities, their way of life and what they have to offer as places to live and visit, and as places where people can work and raise families. Sadly, as we have heard, they are also places that face particular economic challenges. Despite the prosperity that openness to the sea can bring or has previously brought, our coastal communities can experience particular combinations of economic and social fragility. For example, they often have a heavy dependency on tourism and seasonal labour to take advantage of the economic opportunities. There is also a heavy dependency on a relatively limited number of industries in many cases, and such places are more prone to high levels of unemployment. Their attractiveness and proximity to the sea mean that there is real pressure on house prices and a lack of affordability, particularly for young people—all of which can feed into a cycle of decline that builds in business fragilities. Coastal communities are also at the sharp end of the effects of climate change, including coastal erosion and the impact on biodiversity. They are key to the success of our future energy policies, delivering energy security and tackling climate change.

My own constituency goes much further inland than it does up the coast, but I do have a very special, beautiful piece of coastline, from the northern part of the city of Aberdeen to the nature reserves up past Collieston. There has been considerable debate about not just onshore planning decisions but marine spatial planning issues, for example on the interaction between biodiversity on land and the development pressures for housing or, in one particular case, a golf course closely associated with a former occupant of the White House. There is a constant tension between the infrastructure that is needed for offshore energy, whether hydrocarbons or other types, and other demands on the sea, such as our traditional fishing industry.

A good local example of an extremely successful development is the Aberdeen Offshore Wind Farm, also known as the European Offshore Wind Deployment Centre, which is made up of 11 offshore turbines just off the coast of Aberdeen and produces enough energy to power the entirety of the city. I had the great pleasure of going out on a boat just a couple of weeks ago to visit it. It also has a community benefit fund that supports community projects.

Beyond that, there is the ScotWind project. Scotland's current peak energy demand is around 5 GW. ScotWind is set to allow for a capacity of nearly 25 GW. Certainly, our coastal communities are at the forefront of that energy revolution, as well as the development of hydrogen, as the means we might use to store excess capacity that is generated and not required in that moment. It is incredibly frustrating, at a time when we are experiencing some of the highest energy prices in Europe, for people to be able to look out of their windows and see the infrastructure but not be able to see the benefit of that infrastructure on bills due to the way we choose to structure our energy markets.

There is an elephant in the room here—the impact of Brexit, both directly and in the tardy nature of any benefits that might come through. I think particularly of our fishing industry in Scotland, but it also impacts our wider food and drink sector. Let me just take the

example of langoustines. They are the most important shellfish species in terms of landed value and social economic support. In 2019, more than £91 million-worth of langoustines were landed in Scotland, making it the second most valuable stock after mackerel. We exported about 18,000 metric tonnes from the UK to the EU in 2010. That figure had halved by 2019.

I was interested in the comments made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on the impact on the Portavogie community, which I had the great pleasure of visiting with him. There are similarly sized communities along the north coast of Scotland, where processors are not only experiencing trade barriers to exporting but facing energy bills that have increased nearly fivefold. If that is a worry for the processing sector, we can only imagine the worries the catching sector has as a result. If they are unable to supply the processors, the market has gone, and the opportunities for fishing will be exported entirely overseas.

On funding for our coastal communities, Aberdeenshire benefited hugely from structural funding from the European Union. Between 2007 and 2012, for example, it received more than £23 million of European funding, leveraging in total funding to the value of £60 million, from funds such as the European regional development fund, the social fund, the fisheries fund, LEADER and Interreg. In contrast, the Aberdeenshire Council allocation from the shared prosperity fund for the next period is only £8 million. There is a great deal of catching up to do.

In my final minute, let me go back to a previous political life as a local authority councillor in Aberdeenshire, when I had the great pleasure of serving on the North Sea Commission and was vice-chair and then chair of the marine resources group, which concerns itself with themes such as achieving a productive and sustainable North sea, a climate-neutral North sea region, a connected North sea region and a smart region. It brought forward many policy initiatives and allowed regional representatives from Norway, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Scotland to come together to discuss those shared opportunities and challenges.

I think I am correct in saying that at this point in time, although the chair of the overall North Sea Commission used to represent Southend—the council—no English authorities are currently represented. Our Norwegian friends and allies consider the organisation a very effective way of ensuring that bilateral links are maintained and of having discussions. It is a great shame that England, the largest country in the North sea, is not connected in to that organisation. I urge my English colleagues to go back to their local authorities to ask why not.

4.10 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank all who have contributed to this incredibly important debate.

Covid has exposed many things, including the dysfunction of the British state. It is overcentralised, slow, wasteful and clunky. Our economy too often delivers great gains for too few in too few places. We need a new model of economic growth to spread wealth, security and opportunity fairly. As we have heard from the contributions today, nowhere is that more true, sadly, than in many of our coastal communities.

Coastal communities, like many former industrial towns, have seen 40 years of managed decline as the great industries of fishing, shipbuilding and port work have all but disappeared for many. Tourism, boosted in some places throughout covid, has not been enough to mitigate the decline of industry. Added to that, the natural geographical challenges for many of these towns—their location on the edges of our country—have often forced them to the periphery of our economy, but, as we have seen in this afternoon's debate, not from our minds or hearts.

The problem has been turbocharged by 10 years of austerity that has hit our coastal communities hard, ripping apart the social fabric of those towns with the loss of very good jobs. Too many young people are faced with a choice between family and community or opportunity. Too many have had to get out to get on. For the many people who are left growing old hundreds of miles away from children and grandchildren, that is their inheritance, and it has been squandered.

A recent report by the Centre for Progressive Policy found that Conservative-held seaside towns were particularly likely to be pushed into poverty by the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), and his failure to tackle the cost of living crisis. The Office for National Statistics found that the population declined 32% for smaller seaside towns between 2009 and 2018. So, stuck in a low-growth, high-tax cycle, Britain is now unique: a major country that believes it can power a modern economy using only a handful of people in a handful of sectors in one small corner of the country.

Coastal communities do not represent a small section of our society that can easily be forgotten. Approximately 18.5% of the population live in coastal communities—a huge pool of talent and resources that the economy needs. To get the economy growing nationally, we need it working everywhere. We must combat the decline in wages and job opportunities faced by coastal communities, rebalance the lack of opportunity, and entrust local communities with regeneration plans to bring back ageing high streets and infrastructure. That is what levelling up was meant to be about.

The future of levelling up under the new Government is uncertain, and so, too, is the future for many coastal communities. They are absolutely right to have pride in their areas and their rich history. I was born and raised in one. If we visit any of them, we meet people with unlimited energy and ambition for the future of their towns. They are crying out for a Government who will match that ambition, but they have been sorely let down.

Our fishing communities have been sold short by a deal that does not secure our future as an independent coastal state in full control of our waters. Hastings and Rye's is the largest land-based fishing fleet of under 10-metre fishing fleets in Europe. Has Brexit delivered the utopia for them on quotas? No. Many fishermen in Hastings have said they feel stabbed in the back when it comes to the Brexit deal they have been given. Paul Joy and the New Under Ten Fishermen's Association have said that they are angry about the deal the Government failed to secure for them. Their share of the cod quota has gone up from 9.3% to just 10% over five years.

The tourism sector has also not received enough support throughout the pandemic, and there has been a serious lack of affordable housing. Our coast is one of

Britain's greatest assets, but the people who live there have been let down by a lack of investment and poor infrastructure. A 2019 Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities report found that, in most seaside towns,

“Inadequate transport connectivity is holding back many coastal communities and hindering the realisation of their economic potential.”

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) speak about her campaign to secure better rail along the south coast. I thought, “I have been taken back all the way to the 2010 election, when her predecessor was campaigning for the same thing.” After 12 years of a Tory MP and a Tory Government, they are no further down the track in getting electrification between Hastings and Ashford. Coupled with limited access to education, particularly to further and higher education institutions, that curtails opportunities for young people, who deserve so much better.

Poor-quality housing was among the most significant problems reported by coastal residents. The stock of second homes and holiday lets continues to increase—up 40% in three years in England—pushing local people out of affordable housing. We desperately need to improve digital connectivity in coastal areas. We have seen how reliant we are on it over the past three years, and we will be even more so in the future. Many coastal towns have tragically become hotspots for rough sleeping and homelessness.

On all those key indicators, the Government have not delivered, even after the delivery of some pots of funding, such as the coastal communities fund. At the same time, those communities have borne the brunt of Tory deregulation and cost-cutting. Water companies in England and Wales pump raw sewage into our nature an average of every two and a half minutes. Areas such as beaches, playing fields and bathing waters have faced 1,076 years-worth of raw sewage over a six-year period. Hundreds of campaigners, such as the energetic Helena Dollimore, have taken to beaches in Hastings to protest the dumping of raw sewage on our beaches. If Ministers really value our coastal communities, they should stop dumping raw sewage on them.

Now from Rye to Redcar, where thousands of dead crustaceans washed up on the beaches, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) powerfully set out. Those communities deserve answers and an investigation. If the Government and the Tees Valley Mayor have nothing to hide, they should welcome the scrutiny.

I want to hope for better, but the new Prime Minister was responsible for unleashing cuts of tens of millions of pounds to the Environment Agency. Environment Agency data shows that, in subsequent years, the Tories presided over a doubling of the rate at which water companies dump raw sewage. It never needed to be this way.

Under the previous Labour Government, one of the first places to see the potential of investment in wind energy was Grimsby. Now a new generation of young people are powering the world from the Grimsby docks through clean energy and life-changing apprenticeships. Communities know best what their natural resources and assets are, so they should have more say in and control over their investment and regeneration plans.

[Sarah Owen]

We need to bring power, ownership and assets back to people and communities so that they have a stake in their future. That is why we want to replace the right to bid with a far more powerful right to buy, which would mean that communities got first refusal on local assets and the right to buy them without competition. Assets of community value include pubs, historic buildings, football clubs and high street shops—the things that make up the social fabric of our societies. This is about giving communities financial autonomy, which makes them more resilient and insulates them from decisions made at the whim of Whitehall.

The Welsh Government are introducing new planning laws and stronger licensing systems for holiday lets and second homes, which means that communities in Wales will be able to reap the rewards of thriving tourism while preventing areas from becoming ghost towns when holidays end. It will also put an end to people being priced out of their own neighbourhoods just so that homes can stand empty for months on end. As we have heard, that is a problem across the country, but particularly in Cornwall and the south-west. The Government must learn an important lesson from that. By trusting and working with the community, we can find the right balance. We can bring jobs, growth and income while protecting the fabric and spirit of our coastal communities, which matter so much.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lia Nici): It is an absolute honour to be here and speak in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for raising the important issue of coastal communities and their future. This Government's central mission is to level up the UK by spreading opportunity more equally across the country, bringing left-behind communities up to the level of more prosperous areas. I am delighted to have the opportunity to set out our ambitious plans to realise the potential of every place and every person across the UK.

We have already made progress towards levelling up coastal communities through initiatives such as rolling out gigabit broadband, introducing a fairer school funding formula, opening freeports, increasing the national living wage, recruiting more police officers, and further local devolution with more powers being passed to local people, away from Westminster.

My Department's coastal communities fund, which ran from 2012 to 2019, made great strides towards levelling up coastal communities, with investment of £229 million into 369 projects in coastal areas through England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Alex Cunningham: The coastal development fund was important for coastal communities around the country. The Minister's predecessor said that fishermen in Redcar could access the fund for infrastructure—perhaps a new fishing boat or equipment to improve their fishing. However, there are no fish left in the sea for them to catch. Does the Minister agree that we need further investigation into the ecological disaster we have on our hands on Teesside?

Lia Nici: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am not sure I quite agree that there are no fish in the sea.

Alex Cunningham: There are no fish in the sea off Teesside!

Lia Nici: With respect, I am not sure I agree with that statement. Coming from the coastal community of Great Grimsby, where our fishing industry is taking advantage of the increasing Brexit opportunities for quotas, I accept that we need to ensure that fishing is sustainable to ensure that we have a future industry. However, I am not quite sure I agree with the hon. Gentleman there, but DEFRA is not my portfolio or my specialism.

Jim Shannon: The Minister mentioned the moneys dispersed through England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Could the Minister send me the details on the money that was allocated to Northern Ireland?

Lia Nici: Yes, I will write to the hon. Gentleman with those details. Thanks to the coastal communities fund, more than 7,000 jobs have been created, 2,000 existing jobs have been safeguarded, thousands of training places for local people have been produced and more than 3 million visitors were attracted to coastal areas. It is estimated that those visitors brought hundreds of millions of pounds of expenditure into our coastal communities, and that the funding supported almost 9,000 existing businesses, while helping to launch hundreds more.

Selaine Saxby: I agree entirely that the coastal communities fund was a truly excellent thing. Please can we have it back?

Lia Nici: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I will certainly take it back to the Department, although I am not sure how long I will be in this position. I hope it will be for a little bit longer.

With regard to other funding streams and the success of the coastal communities fund, it is right that we now focus our regeneration efforts around coastal communities through our larger and more expansive programmes as part of a more joined-up approach to levelling up. As we have heard from many Members today, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is not the only Department touched by coastal communities. There are also the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—the list goes on—but I will go back into the Department and make sure that we are talking across all Departments to ensure that we get those benefits that Members are looking for.

We also have a long-term ambition to reduce the alphabet soup of Government funding streams. Now that the coastal communities fund has closed, my Department has taken care to ensure that coastal communities of all sizes remain at the heart of our continuing regeneration programmes. For example, there are 22 coastal towns that are each recipients of towns deals worth up to £25 million, including places such as Whitby and Birkenhead. Overall, coastal areas will benefit from over £673 million-worth of investment via the towns fund alone. The towns fund is specifically

targeted at places with high levels of deprivation, which makes it a good fit for some of our coastal towns, as we have heard today. Our towns deals unleash the potential of our local communities by regenerating towns and delivering long-term economic and productivity growth—productivity has been a theme throughout the debate. This is through investments in urban regeneration, digital and physical connectivity, skills, heritage and enterprise infrastructure.

Other coastal communities, such as Maryport and South Shields, are benefiting from future high streets fund grants to revitalise their high streets. We have also heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), who have put in bids for other funds as well. We need to make sure that we continue to revitalise our high streets for our future generations. The future high streets fund is focused on renewing and refreshing high streets, by boosting footfall and reducing vacant shopfronts, for example. In total, coastal communities will benefit from £149.7 million-worth of funding via the future high streets fund. Every one of our programmes, from the community ownership fund to the levelling up fund, features multiple coastal communities on their list of successful bids.

Robin Millar: I am struck by the Minister's list of extensive investments. My own contribution referenced investment. However, Opposition Members mentioned what is happening in Wales, where the proposal is to introduce another tax—a tourism tax. We heard tax mentioned this morning and a tourism tax mentioned here. It seems to me that there is a contrast here between approaches of investment for growth and taxation. Would the Minister agree?

Lia Nici: I thank my hon. Friend for making that clear. We have been having lengthy discussions over the last few weeks about the disadvantages of adopting new taxes. Implementing tax cuts and developing and helping the economy are vitally important. We need to make

sure that, throughout the UK, we try to have a consistent approach that helps members of the public, instead of playing political games.

Steve Double: A number of Opposition Members, including those on the Front Bench, have raised the issue of sewage discharge, as though it is a new phenomenon that has never happened before, when it has in fact been going on for decades. We are the first Government ever to take action on this issue—I know that, because I launched the plan two weeks ago. Does the Minister think I should send a copy of that plan to the Opposition Front Bench, because they seem to have missed it?

Lia Nici: I have heard the point from my hon. Friend, but I need to make quick progress.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye, who called this debate to discuss the future of coastal communities. I hear her calls, and those from other Members, for a coastal communities Minister. That is not part of our Government policy, but hopefully, while I am in this place as the Member for Great Grimsby, everyone will know that I understand exactly the situation that she and other Members are talking about. I will cut short what have left to allow her to wind up.

4.29 pm

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank the Minister, the SNP spokesman the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), and the other Members present for their contributions. It is of regret that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), chose to politicise and personalise her response in an otherwise constructive cross-party debate. Having stood against my predecessor in 2015, she is still fighting a battle for Hastings and Rye, rather than focusing on her new role and constituency. My concerns are for 2022 and the future, not the fight of 2015.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statement

Thursday 8 September 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Price Guarantee

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Her Majesty's Government are acting to protect British households from the spiralling costs of energy. The energy price guarantee will give people certainty with their bills. The EPG will apply from 1 October and will discount the unit cost for gas and electricity use.

This guarantee, which includes the temporary suspension of green levies, means that from 1 October a typical household will pay no more than £2,500 per year for

each of the next two years. This will save the typical household £1,000 a year. It comes in addition to the £400 energy bill support scheme.

The scheme will start on 1 October 2022, when Ofgem's new price cap is due to come into effect. Cost projections for the delivery of the EPG are uncertain as they depend upon usage levels—which are highly dependent on weather patterns—and, for future three-month periods, the wholesale price of energy.

The new guarantee will apply to households in Great Britain, with the same level of support made available to households in Northern Ireland.

HM Government will also support all business, charities and public sector organisations with their energy costs this winter, offering an equivalent guarantee for six months.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out the expected costs as part of the fiscal statement later this month.

[HCWS294]

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