

**Wednesday  
9 November 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 9 November 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 9 November 2022*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** Before we start today's business, I remind Members that there is still an opportunity to plant a remembrance tribute in New Palace Yard to contribute to the constituency garden of remembrance. Stakes will be available in New Palace Yard while the garden is open for planting. Both secular and religious stakes are available. If you are unable to plant your tribute by 4 pm tomorrow, please feel free to contact the Speaker's Office, which will be able to plant one on your behalf. I am sure that the garden will be filled with tributes as a fitting reminder of the sacrifices made by constituents up and down the country.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### NORTHERN IRELAND

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Veterans

1. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support veterans in Northern Ireland. [902053]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Yesterday marked the 35th anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, one of the most horrific losses of life during the troubles. Our thoughts are with the families who lost loved ones that day and others who are immediately affected by what took place. I will be in Enniskillen this Sunday to pay my respects.

My Department and I hold regular conversations with Cabinet colleagues and Departments—including the Office for Veterans' Affairs, whose Minister I met with yesterday, and the Ministry of Defence—to ensure that veterans can access support, no matter where they live in the United Kingdom.

**Mark Fletcher:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill will provide certainty to those who served in Northern Ireland by ending the cycle of reinvestigations that has burdened too many for too long?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The Bill, which is continuing its parliamentary passage, seeks to deliver better outcomes for all those affected by the troubles. We have consulted widely on this crucial issue, and much of what we have heard is reflected in the legislation. I obviously concur with my hon. Friend's view.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the Secretary of State beforehand, so he will know about this question. Is the Secretary of State aware of the disgraceful treatment of Royal Ulster Constabulary veterans in the form of the disablement pension, which is being administered contrary to legal judgments in place? Will he make contact with the Department of Justice's permanent secretary to rectify this despicable situation immediately? People have been waiting for 20 or 30 years for this and it is not sorted out yet.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which he raised with me just a few moments ago. I would appreciate it if he would write to me about the subject so that I can take it up further, as he requested.

#### Benefits of the Union

2. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the benefits of the Union for people in Northern Ireland. [902054]

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** We believe that the United Kingdom is the most successful political and economic union in history, and the Government are committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland may flourish and prosper as an integral part of it. That is why we are continuing to work tirelessly for Northern Ireland's people to restore the Executive, support the roll-out of our energy support package and unleash the full potential of the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

**Kevin Foster:** I am sure that the Minister's assessment will have shown that one of the key benefits of the Union for the people of Northern Ireland is the ability to trade with the rest of the UK. Therefore, what progress is he making in fixing the problems with the Northern Ireland protocol, which may hinder that ability?

**Mr Baker:** The Government are engaging in constructive dialogue with the European Union to find solutions to the problems that the protocol is causing. We are also proceeding with the legislation before the House, which aims to fix the problems in the event that we cannot reach a negotiated solution. Of course, it is the Government's preference to reach a negotiated outcome.

**Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): The Social Democratic and Labour party seeks to build a new Ireland by persuasion and consent and with the endorsement of the widest possible number of people in Northern Ireland, but the rational mechanism for constitutional change is set out in the 1998 agreement, in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in accepted democratic norms. Will the Minister confirm that the Government have no intention of unpicking the principle of consent?

**Mr Baker:** Absolutely. The Government are fully committed to the principle of consent and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. Indeed, our actions are all guided by that full commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and its protection.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State, Peter Kyle.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** Everyone in the United Kingdom was supposed to get the same support this winter, but two thirds of homes in Northern Ireland are heated by heating oil. So that those families can plan ahead, can the Secretary of State or the Minister tell us precisely when they will get their support?

**Mr Baker:** We look forward to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy making a statement, but I will just take this opportunity to put on record that households in Northern Ireland will benefit from: the energy price guarantee, reducing the per unit cost of electricity and gas, which is in place from November and backdated to October; the energy bill support scheme, a £400 payment to all households; the alternative fuel payment, a £100 payment to households not using gas in Northern Ireland; and, of course, the energy bill relief scheme. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right that people are anxious and I regret that today I cannot give an exact date, but we look forward to BEIS making a statement.

**Peter Kyle:** I hope the Minister will encourage his colleagues in BEIS, because it is already winter. Some 60% of homes are being heated by heating oil and they need that support right now. In Britain, heating oil bills have risen from £615 to £1,500, but in Northern Ireland they have risen from £820 to a staggering £1,900. Does he think it is fair that both are getting the same £100 payment?

**Mr Baker:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have taken that up with our counterparts in BEIS. We do so frequently and intensively. My right hon. Friend has just said to me that he met the energy Minister on Thursday. We will continue to press colleagues in BEIS. They are fully aware of the situation and the imperatives, and I think a full answer on the justification for the £100 would meet with Mr Speaker's disapproval at this moment.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP):** The Minister rightly said that the Union is both a political and an economic union. In the High Court and the Court of Appeal, in respect of the Northern Ireland protocol and its application, the Government's lawyers argued that the protocol superseded article 6 of the Act of Union itself—the Union with Ireland Act 1800—which is the basis for the economic union. Will the Government and the Minister assure us that, in any negotiations with the European Union, they will strive to restore our full rights under article 6 of the Act of Union and our place in the UK internal market?

**Mr Baker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to commit that, yes, the Government are determined to restore the constitutional position of Northern Ireland fully within the United Kingdom. That is our intention. I cannot get into the niceties of the legal arguments that were made, but, if I may so, as I understand it, I think they are broadly technical.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Can I also refer to the comments made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), and raise the energy support scheme and the £400 that is to be allocated to the electricity accounts of domestic households

and non-domestic users—businesses and so on—in Northern Ireland? I have spoken with the Secretary of State for BEIS to urge that the payment is brought forward in good time. Will the Minister assure me that he will continue his efforts with us to ensure that the £400 payment is made to the people of Northern Ireland as soon as possible?

**Mr Baker:** We certainly will continue those efforts together. I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman meeting the Business Secretary. I hope he will not mind my saying, though—I understand the reasons he is not in the Executive and that is why we wish to press forward on the protocol—that matters would be somewhat easier if a functioning Executive were in place.

### Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill

3. **Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. [902055]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** The Government are united around our shared objective of addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's past in a way that delivers for those directly impacted by the troubles and helps society in Northern Ireland to move forward. As the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill continues its parliamentary passage, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my officials and I will continue to work closely with colleagues across Government and across the House to ensure that the legislation is effective and durable.

**Dan Jarvis:** It was good to see that the Secretary of State visited the WAVE trauma centre; I know that will have focused his mind on the perspective of victims. This is a very complex and difficult piece of legislation to get right, but he will know that, as drafted, the Bill does not have the support of any of the parties in Northern Ireland. Given that we now have a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State, does he see an opportunity to progress the Bill in a way that will bring people with the Government?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The answer is, basically, yes. The Government understand how important addressing the legacy of the past is for Northern Ireland. We recognise that the Bill is difficult for many, and we continue to engage with stakeholders such as WAVE and across the piece regarding their concerns and how we can address them as the Bill proceeds through Parliament. I hope that the hon. Member recognises, though, that there is no perfect solution to this issue. We are committed to a way forward that deals with Northern Ireland's troubled past as comprehensively and fairly as we possibly can.

**James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con):** When might we see the legacy Bill back in this place, and will there be a necessary review of moral equivalence and terminology?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The Government are clear that we will never accept any moral equivalence between those who upheld the law in Northern Ireland and

those on all sides who sought to destroy it. The legislation seeks to deliver better outcomes for all those most affected by the troubles. It is important to remember that that includes the families of service personnel, more than 1,000 of whom were killed during the troubles. The Government will continue to engage with those most directly impacted by the legislation about their concerns and how these might be addressed. The Second Reading of the legacy Bill in the House of Lords will take place in a couple of weeks' time.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Has the Secretary of State accepted the cold, hard fact that to have any legitimacy the final outcome of the legacy Bill needs the support of innocent victims and relatives of those murdered by terrorists, just as in the wider political realm any outcome of the protocol talks needs support across the community or it, too, will be doomed to failure?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes, I absolutely understand that point. Everything that we have been doing since I became Secretary of State is about trying to engage and consult more with those who had issues with the legacy Bill. It is never going to be a perfect solution to this particular problem, because no perfect solution exists. However, we will do our best to address all the concerns that people raise with us.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): The Bill is welcome and, obviously, complex. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government will see it through to the end, and will he confirm that this legislative proposal is very much the last-chance saloon? These are very complex, historical issues and this is the one chance that we have to try to resolve them. However, in the spirit of trying to build compromise and consensus, will he and the Government keep an open mind about cross-party amendments in the other place?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am quite sure that the Bill is the last legislative vehicle with which any Government will try to address this problem, so it is very important, and it is incumbent on me as Secretary of State, to ensure that we use all the time that we have to improve the Bill, in such a way as my hon. Friend suggests. And yes—I am listening to all parties and all the consultees we talk to, and I am going out to visit victims and victims' groups in Northern Ireland to try to gauge better what sort of amendments will improve the Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister, Tonia Antoniazzi.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): The Joint Committee on Human Rights has declared that the Bill is unlikely to be found compatible with convention rights. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has called it "fatally flawed". Does the Secretary of State dispute that, or will he make changes to it?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am going to make changes to it.

## NHS Waiting Times

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland of the adequacy of resources for tackling NHS waiting times in Northern Ireland. [902056]

10. **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland on tackling NHS waiting times in Northern Ireland. [902062]

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** We are acutely aware of the pressures facing the health service in Northern Ireland. A fully functioning devolved Government is the only way to deliver the necessary reforms to transform healthcare. We have made that point repeatedly to party leaders.

**Liz Twist:** Around one in four people in Northern Ireland are on an NHS waiting list and the role of staff is vital. I understand that the outgoing Health Minister in Northern Ireland wrote to the Secretary of State asking him to implement the summer pay award, as Stormont cannot. Will he take that forward?

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Lady will know that we are deeply concerned about the state of the Northern Ireland Executive's finances and that officials are working urgently with the Northern Ireland civil service to take things forward. Of course we will keep matters under review, but as health is a devolved matter, I have to say that the best way forward would be the restoration of the Executive.

**Tony Lloyd:** Two years ago, the Health Minister Robin Swann, who did such a good job, averted industrial action by ensuring comparability between pay for nurses in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council says that the budget for health will be 2% lower next year than this year. Will the Minister guarantee that there will be money to pay the nurses, without whom there will be no impact on the dreadful waiting lists?

**Mr Baker:** The recommendations of the independent review bodies, which have responsibility for determining pay for health workers, were published in July 2022. The Minister of Health was unable to implement the recommended pay increases because there had not been a wider Executive decision on public sector pay. Pay parity with NHS England was restored after a Northern Ireland-wide strike in 2019-20, but in the Executive's absence, pay divergence has occurred again.

I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government are providing £121 per person for the Executive for every £100 of equivalent UK Government spending over the 2021 spending review period to deliver public services in Northern Ireland. I think his constituents and mine would consider that quite generous funding.

## Trade in the UK

5. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help Northern Irish businesses trade with the rest of the UK. [902057]



**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** The Government are committed to ensuring that businesses can trade freely throughout the United Kingdom, so our approach has two strands. Under the protocol, by the end of the year we will, I am sorry to say, have spent £340 million helping traders to process 2.3 million customs declarations through the trader support service for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That vividly illustrates the problems with the protocol, which is why we are in constructive dialogue to deliver change, as I said earlier, and why we are keeping the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill before Parliament.

**Alexander Stafford:** Northern Ireland boasts some of the UK's most innovative businesses. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Northern Irish businesses are placing environmental, social and governance considerations at the heart of their operations? Does he agree that cementing Northern Ireland's place as a global leader in ESG will stimulate regional jobs and growth and will turbocharge investment in the Province and across the UK?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Northern Ireland boasts some of the UK's most innovative businesses and is a fantastically attractive place to invest. An increasing number of organisations in Northern Ireland report on environmental, social and governance standards. I regularly visit businesses in Northern Ireland, as does the Secretary of State. We will continue to take an interest in their approach to ESG.

**Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance):** What businesses in Northern Ireland want, alongside political stability, is dual market access. As well as working to ensure that businesses have access to the rest of the UK market, will the Minister ensure that access to the European market will be preserved and that the Government will do nothing to compromise it?

**Mr Baker:** We are committed to maintaining dual market access. We hope to negotiate a position with the European Union in which that is possible, while preserving the east-west strand of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We want to restore the constitutional status of Northern Ireland while ensuring that market access; I very much hope that we will do so by negotiation.

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

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** May I take the opportunity to associate myself and my party with the Secretary of State's remarks about the 35th anniversary of the bombing in Enniskillen? Our thoughts are with all those who continue, to this day, to be affected by that event.

Maroš Šefčovič has said that  
"if there is political will",  
issues around the Northern Ireland protocol could be resolved

"within a couple of weeks."

Does the Secretary of State understand the political damage that has been caused by the Government's failure to begin negotiations on the issue earlier in the year? Will he commit to doing all he can to achieve a negotiated settlement before the year is out?

**Mr Baker:** I shall have to answer procedurally, but of course we understand the political implications of where we are. The most significant, if I may say so, is the collapse of the institutions because of the legitimate concerns of Unionism and of the DUP in particular. That is why the Secretary of State and I have been very clear that we recognise the legitimate interests of all parties, including the European Union and Ireland, and it is why we are resolute in the United Kingdom's own interests. Of course if we completely conceded our interests we would achieve a deal within weeks, but the point is that this country and this Government are humble in accepting the legitimate interests of the EU and resolute in defending our own. I very much hope that we will reach a negotiated settlement.

### Power Sharing

**6. Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on power sharing in Northern Ireland. [902058]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** I engage regularly with the Northern Ireland parties—indeed, I spoke to all the Executive party leaders only this morning—and I will continue to keep my Cabinet colleagues fully apprised of those discussions.

**Mr Dhesi:** The Secretary of State told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that he would be calling an election

"at one minute past midnight"

on 28 October, but that did not happen, which has left Northern Ireland in limbo. Reports have since emerged that the Secretary of State was directly overruled by the Prime Minister. Is that true, or did he mean to intentionally mislead a parliamentary Committee?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I do not believe that I was overruled by the Prime Minister.

**Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con):** At this week's session of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly—which you kindly opened, Mr Speaker—we were able to discuss the situation in Northern Ireland relating to the protocol and the talks. Voices were raised from across Europe, and from all parts of the House, encouraging the Government and the European Commission to reach an agreement, because that is the gateway to co-operation on so many other things. I commend the Secretary of State on having the talks, and I say to him, "Let's get a decision."

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work he does in the Assembly. It is a vital new institution, which has deep roots in the European Parliament as well as this Parliament, and it will add great value to our discussions.

### Cost of Living

**7. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling the cost of living crisis in Northern Ireland. [902059]

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** The UK Government are providing vital support to households and businesses across the UK to help with the rising cost of energy. This is an issue that the Secretary of State and I raise frequently with colleagues across Government, including the Business Secretary and the Energy Minister. We seek to provide urgent support for households and businesses across Northern Ireland.

**Alex Cunningham:** The Minister has been asked several times this morning about the £400 energy support payment. What is the blockage preventing the payment from being made now, and when will this be sorted out?

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman will of course understand that these schemes need to be delivered by officials, and that effort has been hampered substantially by the absence of a functioning Executive. We should all acknowledge that without an Executive, these things are more difficult to deliver. As I said earlier, we are well aware of the imperatives, and once again I urge all parties to re-form the Executive so that we can give people the prompt help that they deserve.

### Peace and Prosperity

8. **Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. [902060]

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** Peace and prosperity are intrinsically linked, and the Government are committed to delivering both in order to help Northern Ireland reach its full potential. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his expert contribution to that end when he served in the Department. We are investing £730 million in the new PEACEPLUS programme, which will support economic growth and community cohesion. The Government also provide significant resources to tackle the threat from terrorism, paramilitarism and organised crime.

**Mr Walker:** I saw for myself that growth and city deals offer a huge opportunity in every part of Northern Ireland to improve economic performance and strengthen society, which underpins the peace process. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to maximise the benefits of those deals, we need an Executive in place working hand in hand with the UK Government?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that our £617 investment in city and growth deals presents an historic opportunity to generate innovation and growth across Northern Ireland. He is also right to say that we need a functioning Executive to drive forward that delivery.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): This morning I met members of East Border Region, a cross-party, cross-border local authority-led organisation delivering peace and prosperity across the border. Will the Minister agree to meet them to discuss the work they have done over the past 50 years?

**Mr Baker:** Certainly, I would be glad to meet them. If the hon. Lady will write to me, we will take that up.

### Northern Ireland Protocol

9. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help improve the Northern Ireland protocol. [902061]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** The Government are engaging in constructive dialogue with the European Union to find solutions to the issues caused by the protocol. We are also proceeding with legislation that aims to fix the practical problems that the protocol has created in Northern Ireland in the event of our being unable to reach our preferred negotiated solution.

**Andrew Selous:** The trader support service has helped thousands of businesses in Northern Ireland to navigate the way in which goods move under the protocol. How will this very important service be funded over the next year?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Both the trader support service and the movement assistance scheme provide support to traders moving goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. By the end of this year we will have spent £340 million helping traders to process 2.3 million customs declarations through the trader support service for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we very much hope that we can find a negotiated solution to the protocol issues that will mean we do not have to spend this money in the future.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The Northern Ireland protocol has resulted in the ripping up of the Belfast Agreement and the principle of consent, and the fall of the Assembly. It has also imposed EU law on part of our country, and that law will be imposed by the European Court of Justice. Does the Minister accept that we cannot improve on that and we have to remove it?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Actually, I think there is a negotiated path where we can completely change how we deal with the protocol, which would mean that it dealt with the issues of governance and trade and all the other practical issues that are causing legitimate concerns to the communities he represents.

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on [parliamentlive.tv](https://www.parliamentlive.tv).

### PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

#### Engagements

Q1. [902138] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 November.

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** With Armistice Day on Friday, I know that colleagues across the House will want to join me in remembering those who have lost their lives in the service of our country. This morning

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

**Neil Coyle:** The people I serve will of course be commemorating Remembrance Day. Bermondsey was the original home of the poppy factory, providing work for injured veterans of the great war over 100 years ago.

Covid restrictions were a necessary but painful experience, and across the country most people made enormous sacrifices, including Charlotte, my constituent, and local councillor Lorraine, who were unable to see their mums in their final days. Those people were betrayed by the Conservatives, who parted their way through lockdown—*[Interruption.]* Members might not like it, but they can all go and eat kangaroo testicles, for all I care. Those Conservatives covered Downing Street in suitcases of wine, in vomit and in fixed penalty notices. Can this Prime Minister promise today that he will use his power of veto to ensure that no one who received a fixed penalty notice for breaking covid laws is rewarded with a seat in the House of Lords?

**The Prime Minister:** What I can say is that this Government, during covid, ensured that we protected people's jobs, that we supported the NHS to get through the difficult times and that we rolled out that the fastest vaccine in Europe. That is what we did for this country.

**Q2. [902139] Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con):** I welcome the commitments made by my right hon. Friend at COP27 this week. If he wants to do something that will really help us get to net zero, improve our energy security and help create new opportunities in places such as Milford Haven, south Wales and south-west England, can I urge him to throw the full weight of his office behind delivering floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and crucially to ensure that the decisions now being taken by the Crown Estate and the Treasury mean that the economic value and the jobs of this new industry will stay here in the UK?

**The Prime Minister:** I praise my right hon. Friend for highlighting the incredible potential of floating offshore wind technology to help us move to net zero. He is right about the opportunities in the Celtic sea, and for Wales more generally, and I can confirm that the Crown Estate's leasing process is expected to deliver more seabed leases for many more projects.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

**Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab):** May I join the Prime Minister in his comments about Remembrance Day? We remember all those who paid the ultimate price, and all those who have served and are serving our country.

The Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) told a civil servant to "slit your throat". How does the Prime Minister think the victim of that bullying felt when he expressed great sadness at his resignation?

**The Prime Minister:** Unequivocally, the behaviour complained of was unacceptable, and it is absolutely right that the right hon. Gentleman has resigned. For the record, I did not know about any of the specific

concerns relating to his conduct as Secretary of State or as Chief Whip, which date back some years. I believe that people in public life should treat others with consideration and respect, and those are the principles that this Government will stand by.

**Keir Starmer:** The Member for South Staffordshire spent years courting the idea that he could intimidate others, blurring the lines to normalise bullying behaviour—it is precisely why the Prime Minister gave him a job. The truth is simple: he is a pathetic bully, but he would never have got away with it if people like the Prime Minister did not hand him power. Does the Prime Minister regret his decision to make him a Government Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** I obviously regret appointing someone who has had to resign in these circumstances, but I think what the British people would like to know is that when situations like this arise, they will be dealt with properly. That is why it is absolutely right that he resigned, and it is why it is absolutely right that there is an investigation to look into these matters properly. I said my Government will be characterised by integrity, professionalism and accountability, and it will.

**Keir Starmer:** Everyone in the country knows someone like the Member for South Staffordshire: a sad middle manager getting off on intimidating those beneath him. But everyone in the country also knows someone like the Prime Minister: the boss who is so weak and so worried that the bullies will turn on him that he hides behind them. What message does he think it sends when, rather than take on the bullies, he lines up alongside them and thanks them for their loyalty?

**The Prime Minister:** The message that I clearly want to send is that integrity in public life matters. That is why it is right that the right hon. Member has resigned, and why it is right that there is a rigorous process to examine these issues. As well as focusing on this one individual, it is also right and important that we keep delivering for the whole country. That is why this Government will continue to concentrate on stabilising the economy, strengthening the NHS and tackling illegal migration. Those are my priorities and the priorities of the British people, and this Government will deliver on them.

**Keir Starmer:** The problem is that the Prime Minister could not stand up to a run-of-the-mill bully, so he has no chance of standing up to vested interests on behalf of working people. Take Shell, which made record profits this year of £26 billion. How much has it paid under his so-called windfall tax?

**The Prime Minister:** I was the Chancellor who introduced an extra tax on the oil and gas companies. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about working people, but he voted against legislation to stop strikes disrupting working people, and he voted against legislation to stop extremist protesters disrupting working people, because he is not on the side of working people; that is what the Conservatives are for.

**Keir Starmer:** I am against all those causing chaos and damage to our public services and our economy, whether they are gluing themselves to the road or sitting



on the Government Benches. There was no answer to the question, because the answer is nothing. Shell has not paid a penny in windfall tax. Why? Because for every £1 it spends on digging for fossil fuels, he hands them a 90p tax break, costing the taxpayer billions. Will he find a backbone and end his absurd oil and gas giveaway?

**The Prime Minister:** What the Labour party will never understand is that it is businesses investing that creates jobs in this country. On this side of the House, we understand that and we will support businesses to invest to create jobs, because that is how we create prosperity and how we support strong public services, and that is what you get with a Conservative Government.

**Keir Starmer:** There is only one party that crashed the economy and they are all sitting there on the Government Benches. It is a pattern with this Prime Minister: too weak to sack the security threat sitting around the Cabinet table; too weak to take part in a leadership context after he lost the first one; and too weak to stand up for working people. He spent weeks flirting with the climate change deniers in this party and then scuttled off to COP at the last minute. In the Budget next week, he will be too weak to end his oil and gas giveaway, scrap the non-dom tax breaks and end the farce of taxpayers subsidising private schools—that is what Labour would do: a proper plan for working people. If he cannot even stand up to a cartoon bully with a pet spider, if he is too scared to face the public in an election, what chance has he got of running the country? *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We want to try to get through on time and I know that some Members want to catch my eye. They are not doing a good job so far.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about judgment and putting people around the Cabinet table. I gently remind him that he thought the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was the right person to look after our security. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has said a lot today, but it is clear that he is not focused on the serious issues confronting our country. We are strengthening our economy; he is backing the strikers. We are supporting people with energy Bills; he is supporting the protestors. We are tackling illegal migration; he is opposing every measure. The British people want real leadership on the serious global challenges we face, and that is what they will get from this Government.

Q3. [902140] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Eighty-four years ago today in Germany, hundreds of synagogues were destroyed, Torah scrolls were desecrated, and thousands of Jewish businesses and shops were destroyed. Ninety-one Jewish people were murdered, and later 30,000 Jewish men were sent to the concentration camps. So as we commemorate Kristallnacht, let us remember that it was started with anti-Jewish hatred, it became antisemitism and it is still prevalent in society today. So will my right hon. Friend condemn antisemitism in all its forms, but congratulate the holocaust survivors, who give their testimony year after year? In particular, will he congratulate the Holocaust Educational Trust on the brilliant work it does in ensure that we will never, ever forget what happened in the holocaust?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful question and his continued work on this issue. I completely agree that antisemitism has no place in our society, and we are taking a strong lead in tackling it in all forms. We became the first country to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, and the Government's independent adviser on antisemitism regularly provides advice to Ministers on how best to tackle this issue. May I join my hon. Friend, as I know the whole House will, in praising the work of those survivors who so bravely tell their stories so that we might never forget?

**Mr Speaker:** I call the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about Armistice Day? We remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice and those who continue to serve. We should also remember the nuclear test veterans, who continue to seek justice.

Last night, the Prime Minister suffered the self-inflicted loss of his first Cabinet Minister. A couple of weeks into the job, it turns out that this Prime Minister's judgment is every bit as bad as his predecessor's. Speaking of which, we now know that the Prime Minister's former friend, the former Prime Minister, plans to hand out seats in the House of Lords to at least four Tory MPs, including the current Secretary of State for Scotland. So here is another test of judgment for the new Prime Minister: does he think it right to keep in the Cabinet a man who is clearly far more interested in getting his hands on an ermine robe than in playing by the rules of Scottish democracy?

**The Prime Minister:** I am obviously not going to comment on speculation around such lists. Any list would of course follow the normal procedures and processes that are in place.

**Ian Blackford:** I am afraid that it is not speculation. The Prime Minister clearly does not get how corrupt this all looks to people in Scotland. Not only do we have a UK Government who deny democracy; we now have a Secretary of State who is running scared from it. In the middle of a Tory cost of living crisis, the Scotland Office is now to be led by a baron-in-waiting, biding his time until he can cash in on the £300-a-day job for life in the House of Lords. He should be sacked from the Cabinet and the people of Dumfries and Galloway should be given the chance to sack the Tories in a by-election. The Prime Minister's judgment is already in tatters. If he has any integrity left, will he now put a stop to his two predecessors stuffing the House of Lords with their cronies?

**The Prime Minister:** What the Secretary of State and I are jointly focused on is working constructively with the Scottish Government to deliver for the people of Scotland. I am pleased to be meeting the First Minister tomorrow, because that, I think, is what the people of Scotland want to see.

Q4. [902141] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Criminal gangs who are operating to bring people into this country in small boats—an issue that directly affects my constituents of Folkestone and Hythe—are

openly using social media platforms to recruit people to use their services. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Online Safety Bill will require social media platforms to take effective action to remove this content, and is it also the intention of the Government to bring the Bill back later this month?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work in raising awareness of this particular issue. He is absolutely right. I am pleased to give him the reassurance that the Online Safety Bill will require platforms to remove and limit the spread of illegal content and activity online. Assisting illegal immigration is listed as a priority offence in the Bill, which we look forward to bringing back to the House in due course.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch, Mr Llefarydd. The Prime Minister is struggling to rebuild the Tories' ruined economic credibility after his predecessor scorned the Office for Budget Responsibility, but in a Bloomberg interview just last week, his International Trade Secretary disputed OBR forecasts that trade will be 15% lower because of Brexit. Britain's economic prospects are worsened by being outside the world's largest trading bloc. That is a fact. Who does he agree with—the OBR or his Tory Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** One of the great opportunities of Brexit is our ability to trade more with countries around the world. I know that the right hon. Lady will want to speak to many of the Welsh farmers who are enjoying selling their lamb to the new markets that we have opened up for them. That is what we will get on and deliver.

Q8. [902145] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Excessive housing targets are placing greater and greater pressure on councils to approve development that damages our environment. When the Prime Minister came to Finchley over the summer, he said that he wanted to abolish those targets. Will he use the Report stage of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to bring forward Government amendments to do that?

**The Prime Minister:** The Government are committed to making home ownership a reality for a new generation, and we must build homes in the right places, where people want to live and work, but, as my right hon. Friend knows and as I have said, I want those decisions to be taken locally, with greater say for local communities rather than distant bureaucrats. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is happy to meet her to discuss how best to make that a reality.

Q5. [902142] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister remember back in February, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, that I informed him that, due to his incompetence in that job, the children in my constituency were going to bed that night with no food in their tummies and no heat in their homes. What will he now do as Prime Minister to make sure that, in every community in our country, children are not in that situation in this hard winter ahead?

**The Prime Minister:** The absolute best way to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty, which is something that none of us wants to see, is to ensure that they do not grow up in a workless household. The

record under these Governments is that 700,000 fewer children are growing up in workless households. That is because Conservative Governments create jobs for people, and that is the best anti-poverty strategy that we have.<sup>1</sup>

Q9. [902146] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): On Friday, I visited a bridging hotel in my constituency that currently houses 77 Afghan refugees as local organisations search for permanent accommodation for them following the success of Operation Pitting. Many of the refugees I met held highly skilled jobs back in Afghanistan, including a doctor, an international athlete and Government Ministers. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that our Government will do more to support those highly skilled individuals in entering the UK workforce?

**The Prime Minister:** It is nice to hear from my hon. Friend again this week. I can reassure him that we are completely committed to supporting Afghan refugees into the employment opportunities here in the UK. The Department for Work and Pensions has a full programme in place, and I can also tell him that our Refugee Leads Network brings together refugee organisations and the DWP to connect those refugees with employment opportunities. I look forward to seeing the fruits of that programme with him in the near future.

Q6. [902143] **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Five years ago, the Government belatedly launched a review into the security risk posed by handing thousands of mainly wealthy Russian and Chinese nationals so-called golden visas so that they could live in Britain. They also promised to publish the results of that review. Why have they not?

**The Prime Minister:** We did review and indeed end the visa that the right hon. Gentleman is raising. The Home Office is currently considering the right way to replace that visa with something that is more sustainable and protects our security interests. I will be happy to have the Home Secretary write to him with an update on that process.

Q10. [902147] **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): The UK has a workforce shortage, yet millions of parents are unable to work at full tilt and childcare providers are going belly-up due to policies' being a maddeningly expensive muddle of a mess. Will my right hon. Friend please confirm that, after decades of ineffective tinkering and endless policies, he will be the man to give us proper childcare reform?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased to say that we have announced ambitious new plans to improve the cost, the choice and the availability of childcare to benefit hundreds of thousands of parents across the country. That includes measures to increase the number of children that can be looked after by each staff member and making it easier for people to become childminders. We will respond to all those proposals in very short order.

Q7. [902144] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): I know the Prime Minister has been very busy failing to stand up to bullies, but in the real world schools and colleges across the country looking after actual children are struggling to make ends meet. One London headteacher

1. [Official Report, 14 November 2022, Vol. 722, c. 4MC.]

has scrapped plans for mental health counsellors, a headteacher in Twickenham is no longer filling teaching assistant vacancies and another is axing school trips. Will the Prime Minister give pupils and parents a cast-iron guarantee that in next week's autumn statement there will be no real-terms cuts to school and college budgets?

**The Prime Minister:** We have significantly increased funding going into schools over the next two years, but on top of that it was important to this Government to help those children who were left behind in terms of their education opportunities during the pandemic. That is why we invested £5 billion in helping those children to catch up, including unveiling the most comprehensive programme of tutoring this country has ever seen. It is closing the attainment gap and disproportionately benefiting disadvantaged children, and is something that I know all colleagues will get behind.

Q11. [902148] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Despite a productive meeting with the Immigration Minister yesterday, the Home Office continues to house over 400 asylum seekers in two neighbouring hotels in my constituency. It is clear from my meetings with GPs and Derbyshire police that that huge influx of people in such a small area is putting local services under immense strain. Before services in Erewash hit breaking point, will my right hon. Friend commit to an immediate reduction in asylum seekers concentrated in one place, and will he intervene to set a timetable for permanent closure of accommodation centres at that location?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me give my hon. Friend my absolute cast-iron commitment that we want to get to grips with this problem. The best way to resolve it is to stop criminal gangs profiting from an illegal trade in human lives and the unacceptable rise in channel crossings, which is putting unsustainable pressure on our system and local services. She has my reassurance that the Home Secretary and I are working day and night to resolve the problem—not just to end the use of expensive contingency accommodation, but for more fundamental reform, so that we can finally get to grips with the issue, protect our borders and end illegal migration.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): Under the Prime Minister's short premiership, he has had one Minister resign and one who urgently needs to be sacked. Can the Prime Minister clarify to the House and the rest of the country when the scheduled programme of integrity, professionalism and accountability will begin?

**The Prime Minister:** It is precisely because I want a Government characterised by integrity, professionalism and accountability that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) was right to resign, and it is right that we have an independent process. That is the type of Government I will lead. When situations like this arise, we will deal with them properly, and that is what we have done.

**Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con) *rose*—

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Speaker:** It is quite amazing that when a Minister has gone from his post, he gets more cheers.

Q12. [902149] **Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you to my colleagues. Like the Prime Minister, I was fortunate to join the Royal British Legion in becoming a poppy volunteer recently. I joined colleagues in Abbots Langley, and I was part of Les Vertessy's team, and this week I will be joining Tony Griffiths and his team in the Tudor ward in Watford. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking all the poppy appeal volunteers across the country and in my constituency for their work to ensure that we always remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice? Will the Prime Minister or perhaps the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) visit Watford to meet our heroic veterans to whom we owe so much?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Watford, and it is a pleasure to join him in thanking the Royal British Legion's poppy appeal volunteers in Watford and across the country. There is no greater sacrifice than those who lay down their lives in the service of our nation, so I am proud, as many others are, to support the poppy appeal and to honour our veterans.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): If the Prime Minister or any member of his many households became unwell, would he start ringing the GP surgery at 8 o'clock each morning to not get an appointment, would he go off to accident and emergency and wait 12 hours to be seen, would he call an ambulance that would not come, or would he use some of his £750 million—unearned wealth—to pay privately and see somebody there and then?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me put on record my thanks to the fantastic team at the Friarage Hospital in Northallerton, who have provided excellent care to my family over the years. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the issue of people waiting unacceptably long for treatment that they need. That is why we have put record funding into the NHS to help with backlogs and waiting times this winter, and it is why the Health Secretary and the Chancellor are discussing how best to deliver the reforms we need. I want to make sure that everyone gets the care they need, and we will continue to invest in more doctors, more nurses and more community scans so that we can deliver exactly that.

Q13. [902150] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool is due to benefit from a £300 million private sector-led regeneration project that will deliver thousands of new jobs for my constituents over the years ahead. To deliver this ambitious new project, we need support with a £40 million package to relocate the existing court complex that currently occupies the site. Various Secretaries of State have been supportive of the project so far, so can the Prime Minister give me an update on when we can receive some good news on how we can get this project off the ground?

**The Prime Minister:** May I join with my hon. Friend in recognising the importance of the Blackpool Central regeneration project to the town's levelling-up ambitions? I can tell him that my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary and the Housing Secretary are in the process of resolving this issue for him and how best we can relocate the court complex. He will not have to wait very long for an update on the plans.



**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): It is a critical time for our steel industry, which is hit by massive energy costs and low demand at a time when we need to support our industry to adapt to build the green technologies we will need. Does the Prime Minister agree that our sovereign capability and our national security are dependent on a strong UK steel industry? If so, will the Government not sit on their hands? What is the Prime Minister's plan for steel?

**The Prime Minister:** I am proud of our track record. Not only were we pleased to support one steel company in south Wales that needed our assistance during coronavirus but we have provided more than £2 billion to support energy-intensive industries, including steel, with high energy bills. Thanks to the work of my colleagues, we have also removed the tariffs on exporting steel to the United States. The hon. Lady has my assurance that we will continue to support steel, because we recognise its importance to our economy and to our communities up and down the country.

Q14. [902151] **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): Supermarkets such as Morrisons are abusing their dominant market position on fuel by charging up to 20p a litre more in Bridport than other towns in the region, thus preventing West Dorset residents from benefiting from the reduction in market price, which is unusual these days. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss what action can be taken against those commercial predators who harm our local residents in that way?

**The Prime Minister:** As Chancellor, I was pleased to cut fuel duty by 5p a litre—the biggest-ever cut—to help motorists in our country. I recognise the concerns that my hon. Friend raises, which is why we asked the Competition and Markets Authority to conduct an urgent review of the market. There are some actions to be considered coming out of that review, and I look forward to meeting him and to working with the CMA to explore its recommendations in more detail.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Tomorrow, I will be delivering food bank collection crates across my constituency, because our food banks are running out of food once more. Does the Prime Minister understand the despair my constituents feel that he, as one of the richest men in Britain, is doing so little—[*Interruption.*]

Conservative Members do not like the truth, Mr Speaker. Does he understand the despair my constituents feel that he is doing so little for the poorest in Britain by refusing to cancel the £3 billion tax break for non-doms who profit from our country but will not make it their home?

**The Prime Minister:** I am proud of my and this Government's track record in supporting the most vulnerable in our society, and that will always continue. It is a bit rich to hear that from the right hon. Gentleman—the first person to remind us what happens when the economy is crashed by a Labour Government. That is no way to help people. We will build a strong economy. That is what enables us to support the most vulnerable and strong public services.

Q15. [902152] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): The British people are relying on our party and the Government to fulfil their promises on levelling up, not just up and down the country but sideways too. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Felixstowe and Harwich freeport plan will be judged as a historic failure unless it succeeds in levelling up a deprived ward in my constituency? Will he join me in Clacton to kick-start that plan? Will he also commit to come to the tendering showcase currently in the Jubilee room until 2.30 this afternoon?

**The Prime Minister:** That sounds like an appealing invitation. I agree with my hon. Friend that levelling up has to deliver for communities in every corner of the United Kingdom, including southern coastal communities. He knows that I am a champion of freeports, and I look forward to working with him to see how we can best realise their benefits in his area.

**Mr Speaker:** That completes Prime Minister's questions. Those who wish to leave, please do so quietly.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Points of order come after statements.

**Jeremy Corbyn** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** It cannot relate to PMQs, because you did not ask a question. We will deal with it afterwards.



## COP27

12.34 pm

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on COP27, which I attended in Sharm el-Sheikh on Monday.

When the United Kingdom took on the presidency of COP, just one third of the global economy was committed to net zero. Today, that figure is 90%, and the reduction in global emissions pledged during our presidency is equivalent to the entire annual emissions of America. There is still a long way to go to limit global temperature rises to 1.5°, but the historic Glasgow climate pact kept that goal within reach. I know that the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) for his inspirational leadership as COP President.

The question at this summit was whether countries would deliver on their promises. I am pleased to say that our nation will. We have already cut our carbon emissions faster than anyone else in the G7, and we will fulfil our ambitious commitment to reduce emissions by at least 68% by the end of the decade.

I know that some have feared that Putin's abhorrent war in Ukraine could distract from global efforts to tackle climate change, but I believe it should catalyse them. Climate security and energy security go hand in hand. Putin's contemptible manipulation of energy prices has only reinforced the importance of ending our dependence on fossil fuels, so we will make this country a clean energy superpower. We will accelerate our transition to renewables, which have already grown fourfold as a proportion of our electricity supply over the last decade; we will invest in building new nuclear power stations for the first time since the 1990s; and, by committing £30 billion to support our green industrial revolution, we will leverage up to £100 billion of private investment to support almost half a million high-wage, high-skilled green jobs.

There is no solution to climate change without protecting and restoring nature, so at COP27 the UK committed £90 million to the Congo basin as part of £1.5 billion we are investing in protecting the world's forests, and I co-hosted the first meeting of our forests and climate leaders' partnership, which will deliver on the historic commitment to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030.

Central to all our efforts is keeping our promises on climate finance, so the UK is delivering on our commitment of £11.6 billion. To support the most vulnerable who are experiencing the worst impacts of climate change, we will triple our funding on adaptation to reach £1.5 billion a year in 2025.

In Glasgow, the UK pioneered a new global approach, using aid funding to unlock billions of pounds of private finance for new green infrastructure, so I was delighted to join President Ramaphosa to mark the publication of his investment plan, which delivers on this new model. South Africa will benefit from cheaper, cleaner power, cutting emissions while simultaneously creating new green jobs for his people. We will look to support other international partners in taking a similar approach.

We also made further commitments to support clean power in developing countries. This included investing a further £65 million in commercialising innovative clean technologies and working with the private sector to deliver a raft of green investment projects in Kenya.

The summit also allowed me to meet many of my counterparts for the first time. With the Egyptian President, I raised the case of the British-Egyptian citizen Alaa Abd el-Fattah. I know the whole House will share my deep concern about his case, which grows more urgent by the day. We will continue to press the Egyptian Government to resolve the situation. We want to see Alaa freed and reunited with his family as soon as possible.

President Macron and I discussed our shared determination to crack down on criminal smuggling gangs, and I discussed illegal migration with other European leaders too. We are all facing the same shared challenge, and we agreed to solve it together. I had good meetings with the new Prime Minister of Italy, the German Chancellor, the President of the EU, the President of Israel, and the leaders of the United Arab Emirates, Kenya and Norway, as well as the UN Secretary-General.

In all these discussions, the United Kingdom is acting with our friends to stand up for our values around the world, to deliver stability and security at home. Tackling climate change and securing our energy independence is central to these objectives. Even though we may now have handed over the presidency of COP, the United Kingdom will proudly continue to lead the global effort to deliver net zero, because this is the way to ensure the security and prosperity of our country today and for generations to come. I commend this statement to the House.

**Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab):** I thank the Prime Minister for advance copy of his statement. May I start by raising the case of Alaa Abd el-Fattah? As the Prime Minister knows and has said, he is a British citizen jailed for the crime of posting on social media and has been imprisoned in Egypt for most of the last nine years; he has been on hunger strike for the last six months. The Prime Minister just said that he raised this case with President Sisi; what progress did he make in securing Alaa's release?

It is right that the Prime Minister eventually went to COP27. Remember the stakes: the world is heading for 2.8°C of warming—that is mass flooding, habitats destroyed, untold damage to lives and livelihoods. We must prevent that, for security, for the public finances and for the next generation. That is why it was inexplicable that he had to be dragged kicking and screaming to even get on the plane. Britain should be leading on the world stage, helping the world confront the greatest challenge of our time, but his snub, one of the first decisions of his premiership, was a terrible error of judgment and sent a clear message that if you're looking for leadership from this Prime Minister, look elsewhere, and that if you want to get this Prime Minister to go somewhere, get the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) first—get him to come along, then the Prime Minister will follow.

And the Prime Minister's reluctance is so bizarre because climate action is not just a once-in-a-generation responsibility, it is also a once-in-a-generation opportunity: an opportunity to lower energy bills for good; an opportunity to ensure Britain's security is never again at the mercy of tyrants like Putin; an opportunity to create millions of jobs and break out of the Tory cycle of low growth and high taxes. They are opportunities that he is passing by.

[Keir Starmer]

The Prime Minister said in his speech at COP27 that we need to “act faster” on renewables, so why is he the roadblock at home? As he was flying to Egypt, his Minister was reaffirming the ban on onshore wind—the cheapest, cleanest form of power we have.

The Prime Minister also said at COP27 that he realises

“the importance of ending our dependence on fossil fuels”,

but he inserted a massive oil and gas giveaway when Labour forced him into a windfall tax: taxpayers cash handed over for digging up fossil fuels. Shell has made £26 billion in profits so far this year, but not a penny paid in windfall taxes; he has completely let it off the hook.

And what about the industries of the future? Manufacturers of batteries for cars in Britain: struggling. Green hydrogen producers: struggling. Yet in other countries, these industries are taking off: jobs going abroad because we have no industrial strategy here at home.

The Prime Minister also said at COP27 that it was “right to honour our promises”

to developing countries. So why is he cutting the aid budget? It is always the same message, “Do as I say, not as I do,” and because of that, it will always fall on deaf ears.

It is time for a fresh start. A Labour Government would make Britain the first major economy to reach 100% clean power by 2030. That would cut bills, strengthen our energy security, create jobs, and make Britain a clean energy superpower. And our green prosperity plan would establish GB Energy, a publicly owned energy company, to invest in the technologies and the jobs of the future here in the UK.

As we attempt this endeavour, we have a fair wind at our back: not just the ingenuity and the brilliance of people and businesses in this country but the natural resources of our island nation. Wealth lies in our seas and in our skies, and it is an act of national self-harm not to prioritise them over expensive gas. That is the choice at the next general election, whenever it comes: more of the same with the Tories or a fairer, greener future with Labour.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman raised the matter of my attendance at COP. I gently point out to him that Labour Prime Ministers failed to attend, I think, 12 of the 13 COPs held during their time in office. As Chancellor, I hosted the finance day on COP last year, where we had landmark agreements to rewire the financial system to unlock the trillions of dollars that we need in private finance to flow to help us with the transition. It is a record that I am proud of and one, by the way, that is recognised around the world.

Let me deal with the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s brief substantive questions. He asked about renewable power. Forty per cent. of our electricity now comes from renewable power. That is up fourfold since 2010. What did we inherit? A Labour Government who believed there was no economic case for new nuclear power. He talked about oil and gas. Again, he needs to live in the

real world. Oil and gas are going to be a part of our energy mix in the transition for several years ahead. It is simply pie in the sky to pretend otherwise. The independent Climate Change Committee has even recognised that. The carbon footprint of homegrown gas is half the footprint of importing gas from abroad, so it is a sensible thing to do.

Our plan is the right plan. It is realistic, it is credible, it is delivering for the British people, as well as delivering on our climate commitments. The right hon. and learned Gentleman’s own shadow Chief Secretary described his climate plan as a “borrowing plan”. We know where that leads us. It is not the right thing for the British people. [Interruption.] I know the British people trust me to manage the economy and they will not trust the Labour party. The right hon. and learned Gentleman might be focused on reparations around the world. We are focused on creating a strong economy here at home and that is what we will do.

**Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con):** I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I also welcome the continued commitment that he and the Government are showing to net zero by 2050 to tackle climate change. He is absolutely right to talk about the creation of high-skilled, high-wage green jobs as we green our economy, but people need the training, skills and education to be able to take on those jobs. What are the Government’s plans on education and training for green skills?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank her for her warm comments. I point her to our record investment in apprenticeships in particular, but also to the new lifelong learning entitlement, which acknowledges that people will have to retrain at any point during their life to take advantage of the new economic opportunities that are coming our way. I am pleased that we will be rolling out that programme over the coming years.

**Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP):** I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. Let me also welcome his last-minute change of heart to attend COP27. But I am afraid that, whether he likes it or not, his initial instinct not to attend will be long remembered, and rightly so. It means that he now has a major job to convince people that he is truly committed to the challenge of climate change.

That commitment starts with our own domestic targets, but it is vital that our collective commitment extends to those in the global south. Nations and peoples are being damaged the most by a climate crisis that they have contributed the least to. These are the poorest people on this planet and they always seem to pay the highest price. That is why it is so right and necessary that loss and damage were on the formal COP agenda for the first time.

I am proud to say that, through the leadership of our First Minister, Scotland has become the first developed nation to pledge finance to address loss and damage. Our country is now committed to a total of £7 million—a small sum on the scale of what is needed, but a powerful message to larger nations that need to follow that lead.

We do not need to wait for consensus and a decision at COP. We can start funding loss and damage programmes straightaway.

Will the Prime Minister guarantee that UK overseas aid earmarked for climate finance will be spent within the five-year timeframe, as originally promised? Will he also guarantee that the total aid budget will not be slashed further in the autumn statement next week? Finally, in terms of the new Prime Minister's domestic targets on climate, will he honour the promises made to the north-east of Scotland on carbon capture and storage? Will he commit to taking the Scottish cluster off the Government's reserve list and to fund it right now?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased that it was the UK that established a new Glasgow dialogue on loss and damage to discuss arrangements for funding activities to avert, minimise and address loss and damage, and those conversations are ongoing. With regard to our international climate finance pledges, as I say, we remain committed to the £11.6 billion, and it is our intention to deliver it over the timeframe that was originally envisaged. With regard to targets, again, it should be a source of enormous pride for everyone in this House that we have decarbonised in this country faster than any other G7 country. Our targets are among the most ambitious in the world and we have a credible plan to get on and deliver them.

**Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his crystal clear commitment both in Sharm el-Sheikh and in this Chamber here today to delivering net zero Britain. There is no doubt about that under his prime ministership. Now we no longer have the presidency of COP, which has been acting as a forcing mechanism across Government, can he clarify how he intends that his Government will deliver our ambitious nationally determined contribution to reduce emissions across the disparate strands of Government Departments?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I can assure him that, although we are no longer formally the president of COP, our leadership on this issue internationally will not waver, and he has my commitment on that. I personally will drive this through Government—in conjunction with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and with our climate change Minister—but this is something that pervades all aspects of Government now, and we have to change our thinking on this. It is not the work of any one Department or any one Minister; if we are going to make this commitment work, we are all going to have to play our part.

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Given the scale of what is about to happen to our planet, every single one of us must do what we can to alleviate the problems that we are facing, but the richest 1% of people on our planet are responsible for the same amount of global emissions as the poorest 50%. Does the Prime Minister accept that, unless we tackle the issues of social justice, we will not resolve the problems of climate change, and was he comfortable that one of the worst polluters on the planet, Coca-Cola, sponsored the recent meeting of COP?

**The Prime Minister:** As we have been discussing, I believe we have a moral obligation to help those countries with the transition to net zero and I am proud to say that we are playing our part in doing that. It was great at COP to sit down with leaders from many of those emerging market countries that are benefiting from the investments from our country to help them with the transition. They recognise the leadership role that we are playing.

**Greg Clark** (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): We need to create jobs and prosperity as we transition to net zero. In battery technology, we are world leading in the research, but we need to manufacture batteries here. Given the concerning news about Britishvolt, will the Prime Minister and his colleagues commission an urgent review of how we can deliver the gigafactories that are necessary in this country in the short term to make sure that we have a continuing vibrant car manufacturing industry?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. I think it may have been his idea to create the Faraday battery challenge, but I was pleased to support that, as Chancellor, with £200 million of funding. He is right about the importance of building a domestic gigafactory capability. I was pleased with the announcement from Envision and Nissan in Sunderland. There is more in the pipeline, and we have the automotive transformation fund available to support those projects to build the vibrant ecosystem that he and I both want to see.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome what the Prime Minister said at COP—that tackling climate change goes hand in hand with lowering energy bills, improving our energy security and hurting Putin in his illegal war in Ukraine. However, I am alarmed that at home the Prime Minister has banned onshore wind, one of the cheapest and most popular forms of renewable energy. Will he confirm whether his priority is cutting people's energy bills, improving Britain's energy security and tackling global climate change, or keeping the dinosaurs on his Back Benches happy? Why will he not get rid of the ban on onshore wind?

**The Prime Minister:** It started so well. We are committed to reducing people's bills and to having more forms of renewable energy. Our track record on this is superb: the amount of renewable energy is four times more than in 2010 and zero carbon energy now accounts for half of our electricity needs. We are poised to do more. Offshore wind is the thing we are focusing on, along with nuclear. We are now a world leader in offshore wind, which is providing cheap forms of electricity and energy for households up and down the country. Alongside nuclear, that is how we will transition to a cleaner grid.

**Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for getting our environmental strategies back on track. We clearly have a major issue not simply about carbon, but about the loss of biodiversity both on land and at sea. I welcome what he says about our support for the Congo basin. We have, in a month's time, another crucial summit in Montreal—the convention on biological diversity summit—where further decisions will be taken about how we tackle the loss of biodiversity



[Chris Grayling]

internationally. Can I ask him to ensure that the United Kingdom plays the fullest possible part in those discussions and a leadership role in tackling that issue?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There were many moving statements from leaders across the globe at COP on that particular topic, and I can confirm to him that it is something we are widely acknowledged around the world to be a leader on: we put it on the agenda last year in Glasgow. The Secretary of State for the Environment will be attending that COP in Montreal. Our world-leading Environment Act 2021 commits us to reducing the decline in biodiversity and species loss, and I look forward to working with him to deliver on it.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): Of course, I welcome any investment for the global south to mitigate the horrific damages of climate change, but is this new money, is it coming out of the existing official development assistance budget and what is being cut if it is coming out of the existing ODA budget? As Chancellor, the right hon. Member made savage cuts to climate mitigation programmes. Is he going to replace those?

**The Prime Minister:** As Chancellor, yes, I did make difficult decisions to ensure that our public finances were on a sustainable trajectory. That is not something I am going to shy away from, because I think we have all seen what happens when the Government do not command the confidence of international markets when it comes to borrowing and debt issues. I thought, in that context, it was reasonable to temporarily reduce our ODA budget until our public finances are in a better place, and that is a commitment that I stand by, but we remain committed to the £11.6 billion in international climate finance that we committed at the time. Those announcements have come from that budget. It is very welcome that we are able to continue delivering that, even though we are facing some other difficult decisions on other topics.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Prime Minister has emphasised the very substantial investment being made in climate-related measures both at home and overseas, but does he share my reservations about the idea of spending trillions more pounds on so-called reparations payments, as advocated by the Opposition, at a time when the public finances are already under strain?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is not the right approach, and it is worrying to hear Members of the Labour party suggesting that it is. What we are doing is fulfilling our obligations to help those emerging markets transition to a cleaner future, and we are doing that in a way that supports them, but also supports British companies that are able to provide those investments and create jobs at home as well.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I am grateful for my continued rent-free tenancy in the Prime Minister's head, but if in future he could just let me know when he intends to speak about me, that would be helpful. That is the norm in the House.

Could I ask the Prime Minister if he would take this opportunity to welcome the election of President Lula in Brazil, and his commitment to both social justice and environmental justice, and to confirm what the previous Prime Minister told this House, which is that no British bank, financial institution or company will henceforth be allowed to invest in fossil fuel extraction anywhere in the world as part of our contribution to bringing about net zero globally?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. If he could ask the Leader of the Opposition to give me advance sight of his questions, I would be happy to let him know if I need to bring him up on questions of security.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on the importance of ending international finance for coal-fired power plants. It was a landmark agreement that the COP President and the UK presidency achieved at COP. Ninety other countries have signed up to it, at a minimum, and I am keen to make sure that we deliver on those commitments and we push them through the international financial system.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): My Essex constituents absolutely get the impact of climate change, because they saw it at first hand in those awful fires last summer. Many of them also get that, unless we help other countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change, we will see even more unsustainable migration, and that will impact us at home. So it is great that my right hon. Friend has reconfirmed our commitment to the investment amounts that we promised in Glasgow and that he has reconfirmed our commitment to deliver those on time. Can he confirm that we will continue to work with other countries to make sure those investments are made on time?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work in this area, which she is rightly passionate about and where she has made an enormous difference. I look forward to receiving her continued advice on how we can deliver on our commitments. I am pleased to give her that reassurance. Actually, as she knows, the doubling of our international climate finance commitment was a catalyst for many other countries around the world doing the same. We want to ensure that all that money is spent, and spent well. That is what we will do.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister just said how important it is to keep our promises on climate finance, and I agree. Will he explain why he does not seem to agree with himself? His Government have not kept their climate promises. He has not delivered the \$300 million that we still owe to the green climate and adaptation funds—when will we see that? Will he ensure that all new climate finance is new and additional and not being raided from an ever diminishing aid budget? Does he recognise that the moral obligation that he talks about must extend beyond mitigation and adaptation to address loss and damage? Will he support the establishment of a finance facility for loss and damage at COP27?

**The Prime Minister:** On loss and damage, I have already made the point that we established the Glasgow dialogue to see how best to take forward those discussions.



I will not pre-empt the discussions happening at COP, but that is not the same as reparations—I think the hon. Lady understands that—which is not what is on the table. That is clear in the language that is being debated at COP.

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): At COP26, the Prime Minister was successful in mobilising hundreds of billions in international private capital to support the challenge of net zero, which seems a much better deal than Labour's plan, which would place a huge burden on British taxpayers. What further steps will my right hon. Friend take to consolidate London's leadership as a centre for green finance?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend knows this well. Indeed, he was responsible for the retail green sovereign bond that we issued here—we were the first country in the world to do so—and he deserves credit for that. I am pleased that for, I think, the second or third year in a row, London has been named the world's leading place for green finance. We are taking forward a range of initiatives around disclosures to make that even more of an advantage for us, including more carbon trading. I look forward to getting his advice on how we can make that aspiration a reality.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): The Welsh Labour Government are setting up a publicly owned company to accelerate investment in onshore wind and other renewables, thus reducing emissions, increasing energy security and using profit for the public good. Given that onshore wind is the cheapest form of renewable energy, when will the Prime Minister step up to the mark, match the Welsh Government and bring forward an accelerated investment programme for onshore wind across England?

**The Prime Minister:** There has been a slightly chequered history of Labour councils and publicly owned energy companies—in Nottingham, from memory—and that is not a model that we want to emulate. However, we are supporting Wales with the transition. We invested in the Holyhead hydrogen hub, which is a potential future opportunity, and we are looking at nuclear sites and, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), at the huge potential of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, which will also all be good for Wales.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): It is so obvious that we have a Prime Minister who is personally committed to this agenda. My constituents really appreciate that, as does their MP. The Prime Minister knows how important the Solent freeport in his old neck of the woods could be to my constituents and those much further afield. Will he and his Government work with us—not least because part of the freeport is based at and around Southampton airport—on sustainable aviation fuels? This country has a really good lead in this area already, and that could be to our advantage as well as lead to a whole new future of clean air travel.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. He is right about the potential of the freeport, which I am pleased to champion, not least as a Southampton boy, as well as the opportunity for sustainable aviation fuel. It is clear from conversations with industry

that we are in a position of world leadership on that. I was pleased to invest about £200 million to help commercialise two sustainable aviation fuel plants and I am encouraged that the private sector is taking that and investing far more to bring it to reality. That is an exciting development for the UK.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has a challenge in getting money out of the door. The BioYorkshire project, which will bring transformation—it is the biggest green new deal before the Government—needs funding, which has been committed but, two years down the line, not released. When will he bring that funding forward for the transition to the technologies of the future that we need to address climate change?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with the hon. Lady that we need to invest in innovation. That is why we have a £1 billion net zero innovation portfolio, because ultimately it will be the technologies of the future that will help us solve this problem. If she writes to me, I will be happy to look into that specific bid.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's attendance at COP27 and our commitment on climate change, which is the biggest long-term strategic challenge that the globe faces as we test the limits of our fragile planet. With net zero a long way off, we face problems today from extreme weather patterns including floods and increased crop failures. Their scale will further erode global security, with vulnerable states subject to desertification, food shortages and rising sea levels. Will the Prime Minister recognise that the burden in meeting some of those challenges will fall on our armed forces both domestically and internationally and, therefore, this is not the time to cut the defence or international aid budgets?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is right about the devastation that climate change is causing, not least in Pakistan where 30 million are impacted as an area the size of the entire United Kingdom is now under water, with disease rife through the water. He knows that I remain committed to supporting our armed forces, and that will always be the case.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister gives oil companies who are already making billions in excess profits 90p in tax breaks for every £1 they invest in oil and gas, literally fuelling the climate change that will bring more flooding to the north-east, destroying our agriculture, lives and livelihoods, prospects and prosperity. Yet he refuses to invest in the north-east's transport infrastructure, industry, green technologies, people and skills to combat climate change. Why does he treat the oil companies with such largesse and leave the north-east with nothing?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady is simply not right. It is not realistic or practical to think that we do not need to use oil and gas for the foreseeable future as a transition fuel. The choice for Opposition Members is: would they rather have that from here at home or import it at almost double the carbon footprint? It seems to me relatively straightforward that we should support domestic oil and gas production in the short term.

[*The Prime Minister*]

The hon. Lady talks about new investments in renewable energy in the north-east as if they are not happening. She might want to visit Teesside. Whether it is offshore wind, hydrogen or carbon capture and storage, that is where the future is, and it is happening in the north-east.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): We have all seen the impact of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine on energy and food security. Will the Prime Minister join me in addressing Russia's false narrative about the impact of the United Kingdom's sanctions? I was the United Kingdom's Minister for sanctions, and it is crucial that we address the false narrative. The United Kingdom's sanctions against Russia do not target exports or food supplies for developing countries. That is squarely the responsibility of Putin and his Administration.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It was very disappointing to see Russia remove itself from the Black sea grain deal—I am pleased that there is now forward progress on that—because, as he knows, almost two thirds of the wheat that passes through the Black sea is destined for developing countries and emerging markets. It is vital that that food flows and we will do everything we can to put pressure on Russia to ensure that it continues to happen.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): At COP27, the Prime Minister boasted about the UK's investment in renewables, yet a recent report by the Welsh Affairs Committee warned that Wales's renewable energy potential is

“threatened by a lack of UK Government leadership on improving grid connectivity”.

The Prime Minister mentioned a number of worthwhile, good projects in the pipeline in Wales, but, without that connectivity, many of them are under threat. Will he set out an accelerated timetable for improving grid capacity so that Wales can realise its full potential in energy generation and, in so doing, slash bills for communities throughout Wales?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady is right that we need to ensure that we invest in our grid to enable the transition. That is an absolutely fair point and I know it is something the National Grid is focused on. I would be happy to get more into it and discuss it with her in the future.

**Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): The UK is proof that one can achieve growth and slash emissions at the same time. Does the Prime Minister agree that we have an enduring commitment to go for clean and sustainable growth?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our record on this is a 44% reduction in climate emissions and 76% GDP growth. That shows it is possible and that is what Britain is delivering.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What exactly is the Prime Minister's problem with onshore wind?

**The Prime Minister:** It is right that we bring people with us as we transition to net zero. The worst thing we can do is alienate communities if we want to actually deliver on our climate commitments. As it turns out, we are very lucky to have a very reliable and very affordable form of energy in offshore wind, which is also creating jobs domestically in the UK. It is right that that is our priority.

**Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): After two wonderful weeks last November in Glasgow, with the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), what became really clear was how far ahead of Governments industry and businesses are in addressing these issues and challenges. For example, on electric vehicles, range anxiety is an issue for those of us who live in the north-west of England and have to try to get to London. Can I have the Prime Minister's commitment that we will do everything we can to get government out of the way of private industry, for example in EV charging infrastructure roll-out?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We will not solve this problem without the investment and co-operation of the private sector. Governments simply cannot do it alone. When it comes to electric charging infrastructure, we have helped with seed funding of around £2 billion. We have one of the most developed charging infrastructures in Europe, but she is right that, ultimately, it has to be the private sector that delivers the investment required.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister say what view he takes of the role of local authorities in the climate emergency? In 2010, there were some fantastic programmes. Had they continued to 2022, we would have a third of our homes in which people—homeowners or renters—would be paying a third of the bills they are paying now. What view does he take of local authorities getting stuck in to retrofit, particularly in the private rented sector, which is very draughty and leaky?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased that, in the spending review I conducted as Chancellor, we put aside almost £5 billion to support energy efficiency, including several programmes that support local authorities to upgrade the energy efficiency of both low-income private rented tenants and those in the social housing sector. Those programmes are up and running. They are well funded and local authorities can benefit from them.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am delighted that the Government see nuclear power as part of the low-carbon future and that its skills are part of the green economy, but does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that the First Minister of Scotland and her SNP-Green coalition Government continue to block nuclear development in Scotland, depriving constituencies like mine of important potential jobs? Perhaps it is an issue he might raise with her when he meets her tomorrow.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is right about the importance of nuclear power. We believe it can provide around a quarter of our energy mix by 2050. It is a zero carbon, secure and baseload source of power. That is why we have enabled more funding for

advanced forms of nuclear technology, such as advanced modular reactors and small modular reactors, and it would be good if we could spread the benefits across the whole United Kingdom.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): In the relentless and obsessive pursuit of net zero, the Government are now adopting policies that are contradictory and, in some cases, dangerous. We are going to import billions of pounds-worth of natural gas from countries who frack that gas, yet we are turning our back on the natural resources we have in our own country, sacrificing revenue, jobs and energy security. We are going to rely more on wind and solar power, the earth metals for which are in the hands of autocratic regimes, especially China. We are importing wood from America to burn in a power station in the United Kingdom at a cost of billions to electricity consumers. Those policies might be welcomed by the chattering classes, but does the Prime Minister understand the bewilderment, frustration and anger of those who struggle to pay their electricity bills and worry about energy security?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about importing liquified natural gas, which is why I am keen to encourage more exploitation of our domestic oil and gas resources in the North sea. He and I are aligned on that. We have conducted a new North sea licensing round, leading to about 100 new licensing applications. That will increase jobs in the UK and our energy security, and that is the right thing to do.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): The intervention and leadership of the Government is of course welcome, as is the focus on helping developing and climate change-vulnerable countries. What initiatives are being considered, or could be considered, for businesses to share their technologies, intellectual property and so on with expertise to help those countries move forward far more quickly than we have been able to do? It is, after all, business that will need the research and development in this field which will solve the global problem we all face.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is the type of leadership and contribution that Britain can make to solving the problem globally. We are fortunate to have some of the world's best researchers and companies tackling this problem. On Monday, I was pleased to announce about half a dozen investment opportunities in Kenya, which do exactly what he describes: British expertise helping a country with its transition in areas such as solar and geothermal. That is an exciting template for the future.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Why is the Prime Minister banning onshore wind, the best renewable energy?

**The Prime Minister:** We are providing four times as much renewable electricity today as we did in 2010. We have plans to go even further as we roll out offshore wind, which is a competitive strength for the UK. We will complement that energy mix with new nuclear, a source of energy that we all recognise we need, but for which the previous Labour Government said there was no economic case at all.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am trying to get everybody in. I ask Members to start with a question, and then stop. [*Laughter.*]

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement on COP27 and in particular for highlighting his discussions on migration with other European leaders. Does he agree with me that if we are to sort out the migration crisis, we must all work together to help developing countries with their climate change challenges, so that we can also deal with the migration crisis?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was pleased to discuss the migration issue with several European leaders in particular, because we cannot solve this problem alone. As she said, it is far better to solve it at source before it arrives on our shores. That is the approach we are going to take.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that he and his party are more trusted by the British public on the economy. Well, there is one way of testing that, isn't there? It is with a general election and we would be happy to have that.

Let me ask the Prime Minister whether he would like to visit the Rhondda to see the problems that climate change is already bringing to one of the poorer constituencies in the land: flooding, run-off from the mountains, housing stock that is very elderly and difficult to insulate, and a local authority that already has £12 million of extra budget next year just to keep the lights on and the schools and leisure facilities running. Will he visit the Rhondda, and try to sort out some of those problems?

**The Prime Minister:** One of the things the hon. Gentleman mentioned was energy efficiency. As I said, we have billions of pounds in programmes to support local authorities to improve the energy efficiency of homes, particularly in deprived communities and for those on low incomes. Those adaptations can save them hundreds of pounds on their energy bill. I urge his local authority and others to engage with us to deliver them.

**Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): As we have heard today, energy security has never been more vital. The journey to net zero is also our journey to energy sovereignty. It will also mean lower bills and more reliable, less volatile prices for our domestic market. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Cornwall will play a vital role, offering lithium, floating offshore wind and deep geothermal energy? Can I extend an invitation to the Prime Minister to visit my businesses and see the work going on in the south-west?

**The Prime Minister:** I would be delighted to do so. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of building resilience in supply chains such as lithium. The Minister for Science and Investment Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) is focused on our critical mineral strategy, which was raised earlier. That is right, and Cornwall can play a key part in improving our resilience and security.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): António Guterres said:



[Wera Hobhouse]

“We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator”.

The Prime Minister’s Government are good at making plans and promises and setting targets, but they are poor at delivery. Will he therefore re-establish the Department of Energy and Climate Change to co-ordinate a whole-Government approach, given that the delivery of net zero is fragmented and not on track?

**The Prime Minister:** Actually, we are on track to meet all the climate targets that we have set. Our track record is that we have met them all. They are the most ambitious in the world and I reassure the hon. Lady that this is a whole-Government effort. Every Minister in the Government is committed to doing what they need to do to deliver on our ambitions.

**Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): In expertise terms, Stroud is the greenest constituency in the greenest county of Gloucestershire, so I welcome the important challenge about what net zero means to everyday people, because we are providing the solutions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Government programmes such as Jet Zero and expert green tech businesses such as those in Stroud will be pivotal to the UK’s meeting its targets here affordably for our constituents and to helping other countries with climate challenges?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why this can be a win-win. There are already hundreds of thousands of jobs in the UK involved in our transition to net zero. Not only is that good for our economy, but that expertise is helping other countries to make the transition. We need to make sure that all our funding and all our policies are geared towards supporting her fantastic businesses in Stroud, because that is the right thing to do not just for us, but for the world.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I wrote to the Prime Minister to ask him to make representations to the Egyptian President about the case of my constituent Jessica Kelly’s husband, Karim Ennarah, an Egyptian human rights activist who was imprisoned. We campaigned and managed to get him released, but he is the subject of a travel ban and an asset freeze. First, did the Prime Minister raise that case, along with that of Alaa Abd el-Fattah? Secondly, does the Prime Minister think that it is right that his Government should divert billions of pounds of aid funding away from those who are most vulnerable to climate change and other risks when he has already made aid budget cuts?

**The Prime Minister:** We are not diverting funding; we remain committed to the £11.6 billion of climate finance that we outlined last year. I raised in general the topic of human rights with the President. I am keen to see the release of the detainees, as are other countries, and we will continue to press on all those matters.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Lord Goldsmith for his work at COP27 to persuade Indonesia—home to globally important forests—to play a key role in the new forests

and climate leaders’ partnership? When the Prime Minister goes to Indonesia for the G20 summit, will he discuss with President Jokowi opportunities for energy transition finance, marine energy co-operation and our starting to work together on a green-tinted free trade agreement?

**The Prime Minister:** Not only will I pay tribute to the work of Lord Goldsmith on that particular issue, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his knowledge of and engagement in the region. He deserves praise and credit for that. He is right about the exciting opportunity to have what is called a “country platform” with Indonesia to bring together public and private finance to help it with its energy transition. I am hopeful that we can play a big part in that.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister’s refusal to approve onshore wind generation the reason why he cannot commit to 100% clean energy by 2030?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the Labour party’s plans on climate change were called “incredible” and “unrealistic” at the last election. Our plans are practical and credible and they are the most ambitious in the developed world. I feel very good about them, but we need to do this in a realistic way that actually brings people along with us. That is what our targets do.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Today, Just Stop Oil protesters have been on the M25 causing disruption and misery to my constituents; that includes causing problems with access to my local hospital. Does he agree that rather than engaging in illegal stunts and endangering lives, those protesters should look at our record of delivery on net zero—from renewables to the Glasgow climate pact—and work with us constructively to deliver on our environmental ambitions?

**The Prime Minister:** I completely agree, and I sympathise with my hon. Friend’s hard-working constituents who are having to deal with that kind of disruption. That is why we are moving ahead with legislation to give the police the powers that they need to stop that type of extremist protesting disrupting the lives of working people. I very much hope that the Labour party joins us in supporting those changes.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister urgently press ahead with carbon capture and storage in the Humber, which is the largest industrial emitter of carbon? It is not right that the British taxpayer alone should pay for that. Should multinational companies that emit carbon not also have a role to play in financing carbon capture and storage?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the importance of carbon capture and storage, which is why we have committed to investing £1 billion to develop a couple of clusters over the next several years. She will know about the announcement that has been made on those. She is also right that this cannot be just about what the Government do. Our money is designed to catalyse the investment necessary from private companies, and I hope to see that happen.



**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's speech at COP27 and especially his commitment to supporting green private finance projects, but does he agree that we should support private firms who back all sustainable environmental, social and governance principles, not just those exclusively pursuing net zero?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes; my hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need a broader approach, and that is what we will take as a Government. The UK is leading on a broad range of things when it comes to sustainability standards, and I look forward to getting his input on how best we can take that agenda forward.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Prime Minister will know, 8 million people die every year from air pollution—63,000 die in Britain—and by 2050 there will be as much plastic in the sea as there are fish. First, will he invoke World Health Organisation air quality standards in Britain as legally enforceable and encourage that at COP27? Will he also look at my Plastics (Recycling, Sustainability and Pollution Reduction) Bill, which is on today's Order Paper? The Bill suggests that we should not export plastics, that manufacturers should pay the cost of recycling and that we should forge ahead with a global plastics treaty in COP27.

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased that air pollution has fallen significantly since 2010, which includes about a 40% reduction in nitrogen dioxide. Our Environment Act 2021 has new targets in place and we have supported local authorities with about £800 million in funding for that. On plastics, that Act means that we will ban more single-use plastics, charge for others and have a new enhanced producer responsibility and a deposit return scheme. It is an incredibly ambitious agenda to reduce the amount of plastic in our system.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud that my Vauxhall constituency is leading the way with so many of my constituents concerned about global warming. My local council, Lambeth Council, was the first local authority in London to declare a climate emergency, leading the way on policies to clean up the air. However, this action needs not just local but national and international leadership, so it was sad that the Prime Minister failed to show that through his reluctance to attend COP27. Will he match the commitment from my constituents by showing his commitment and financing to help to address this important issue?

**The Prime Minister:** We have given that commitment, including to £11.6 billion for international climate finance. However, as we have discussed, this is not just about what the Government can do; we need the private sector and private finance to help with the transition. That is why all the changes that we are making to the financial system are equally important, because that is where we will unlock the trillions of dollars required.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Across the world, economies are facing huge challenges caused by Putin's war in Ukraine. Does the Prime Minister agree that tackling climate change and achieving energy security are aligned and that the war in Ukraine has made progress on domestic, sustainable energy production even more urgent?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is spot on; those two things go hand in hand. Greater energy security will help us to meet our climate ambitions. We want cheaper, safer and cleaner forms of energy here at home, and that is what our plans are delivering.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister very much for his statement. I welcome the news that climate change remains a priority, but will he further assure the House that heating and eating for our elderly and vulnerable will also be a priority? While the Government seek to be a good steward of the environment—I welcome that—they also need to help our people have the basic quality of life that they deserve in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to our elderly constituents and citizens. It is right that they get extra help with bills over the winter. That is why I tried to prioritise them with the announcements earlier this year on the cost of living payment, and it is why they receive a winter fuel payment, but they will always be uppermost in our mind because they are particularly vulnerable to cold, and we will make sure that we look after them.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Nature is declining rapidly, with 1 million species at risk of extinction and with deforestation accelerating in the Amazon and around the globe. If we are to limit global warming to 1.5°C, we must urgently halt and reverse that loss. Will the Prime Minister now support Labour's call for a net zero and nature test to align all public spending and infrastructure decisions with our climate and nature commitments?

**The Prime Minister:** That is why I am so pleased that one of our signature achievements last year was to have countries that account for 90% of the world's forests agreeing to reverse and halt land loss and degradation by 2030. We are playing our part in that. The announcements on Monday supporting the Congo were warmly welcomed not just in that country, but by other countries in Africa, because they know that we are committed to this agenda.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): The Prime Minister is very proud of the £11.5 billion that he keeps talking about and that has been pledged, but where will it actually be disbursed? If the aid budget is being cut, surely it will come at the expense of other equally valid and equally important projects. How on earth does slashing the 0.7% budget commitment demonstrate the United Kingdom's global soft power?

**The Prime Minister:** The £11.6 billion is being spent over the period that was outlined at the beginning. It is right that we invest in quality projects that can make a difference, not rush to get money out of the door and waste it. I make no apology for having had to make some difficult decisions as Chancellor to ensure that our borrowing was on a sustainable trajectory. That is the right thing for this country: it is the right way to make sure that we can restrain the rise in interest rates. This country will always continue to play a leading role around the world, and I am proud that we are doing so.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): President Zelensky has proposed an initiative for

[Deidre Brock]

“a global platform to assess the impact of military actions on climate and environment”,

citing the impact of Russia’s war on Ukraine as an example of war driving deforestation and renewed fossil fuel generation. Will the Prime Minister be supporting Ukraine’s initiative at COP27?

**The Prime Minister:** I was pleased to speak to President Zelensky on my first day in office. He and I will remain in regular dialogue; I am sure that we will discuss many ways in which we can support Ukraine, first and foremost in repelling the illegal Russian aggression that it is experiencing.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given the rapid decarbonisation of the steel industry, there is no business case for the west Cumbria coalmine, a proposal that is on the desk of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. When it comes to protecting our planet, there was never a case for it. We have to keep our fossil fuels in the ground, not dig them up and burn them. The Prime Minister will be aware that, for the third time now, the Government have delayed the decision whether to approve the west Cumbria coalmine. It was delayed until after COP26 and has now been delayed until after COP27. We have been told that 8 December is the hard and fast date for the decision to be made. Will his Government stick to that promise? Will they do the right thing and say no to a new coalmine?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman knows that these are quasi-judicial processes and it would not be right for me to comment on them.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Prime Minister for his statement on COP27 and for answering questions for just short of an hour.

## Northern Ireland Elections

1.32 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the issues arising from the failure of the devolved Government of Northern Ireland—the Northern Ireland Executive—to form. The overriding priority of this Government is to implement, maintain and protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

“Northern Ireland is governed best when it is governed locally.”

Since May,

“that has not been possible. However, our commitment remains absolutely clear”.

The Government believe that this is the moment for restoration of the devolved institutions

“and will work to that end as a matter of utmost priority... My predecessors have all referred to critical times for Northern Ireland, and there have been many, but this year is indeed critical”.—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2006; Vol. 441, c. 287.]

I can see you are thinking that you might have heard those words before, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is because you have: they were spoken by the then Secretary of State and right hon. Member for Neath at this Dispatch Box back in 2006.

Although these are different times, with different issues affecting Northern Ireland, I and this Government believe strongly that the people of Northern Ireland deserve a functioning Assembly and Executive where locally elected representatives can address the issues that matter most to the people who elect them. Back in May, people cast their votes in Northern Ireland to give their communities a voice in Stormont. However, for six months the parties have not come together.

On 28 October, the deadline for forming an Executive, as set out in the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022, passed. That is hugely disappointing. As a result, I am bound by law to call new elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, as set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. Those elections will have to take place within 12 weeks of 28 October.

Since 28 October, I have been engaging widely in Northern Ireland with the parties, with businesses, with community representatives and with members of the public. I have also spoken with other international interlocutors. I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of those to whom I have spoken think that an election at this time would be most unwelcome.

What people would welcome is having their devolved institutions up and running, because they are worried to see a massive £660 million black hole in this year’s public finances at the same time that their public services are deteriorating. They are worried that almost 187,000 people in Northern Ireland have been waiting for more than a year for their first out-patient appointment. They are worried that the share of working-age adults with no formal qualifications is higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. There is also legitimate and deep concern about the functioning of the Northern Ireland protocol. That concern is felt across Northern Ireland and very strongly indeed in the Unionist community.

The one thing on which everyone agrees is that we must try to find a way through the current impasse, in which I have a legal duty to call an election that few people want and that everyone tells me will change nothing. I will therefore introduce legislation to provide a short, straightforward extension to the period for Executive formation. The current period will be extended by six weeks to 8 December, with the potential for a further six-week extension to 19 January if necessary. The aim is to create the time and space necessary for talks between the UK Government and the European Commission to develop, and for the Northern Ireland parties to work together to restore the devolved institutions as soon as possible.

As I stand here, the Northern Ireland Executive have no Ministers in post. That means no Ministers to make the choices that deliver the public services that people rely on, to react to the budgetary pressures that schools, hospitals and other key services face, or to deliver the energy support payments that this Government have made available to people across the rest of the United Kingdom. Before leaving his post, the Northern Ireland Finance Minister highlighted a £660 million in-year budget black hole, but there are no Ministers in the Executive to address it.

As civil servants do not have the legal authority to tackle these issues in the absence of an Executive, I must take limited but necessary steps to protect Northern Ireland's public finances and the delivery of public services. As has been done before, the legislation that I introduce will enable Northern Ireland Departments to support public service delivery, make a small number of vital public appointments such as those to the Northern Ireland Policing Board, and address the serious budgetary concerns that I have mentioned.

At a time when so many people are concerned about the cost of living in Northern Ireland, I know that the public there will welcome a further measure that I intend, which will address another matter that was addressed by the former Secretary of State whom I quoted earlier. People across Northern Ireland are frustrated that Members of the Legislative Assembly continue to draw a full salary while not performing all the duties that they were elected to do. I will therefore be asking for this House's support to enable me to reduce MLAs' salaries appropriately.

Let me end by repeating that the overriding priority of this Government is to implement, maintain and protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which has been the bedrock of so much of the progress in Northern Ireland over the past quarter-century. In recent days, some people have called for joint authority in Northern Ireland. Let me say that that will not be considered. The UK Government are absolutely clear that the consent principle governs the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, under which Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. We will not support any arrangements that are inconsistent with that principle. In addition, we remain fully committed to the long-established three-strand approach to Northern Ireland affairs.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, I have found myself reflecting on the fact that political progress in Northern Ireland has so often required courage, understanding and compromise. I hope that the measures that I have announced in my

statement will allow some extra time for those qualities to be displayed once again. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the Opposition spokesperson, Peter Kyle.

1.39 pm

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Here at Westminster, our respective parties should strive to work together and build consensus on Northern Ireland whenever possible, so I appreciate his efforts to inform me of developments over the weekend and during the period since the 28 October deadline passed.

Tony Blair was right when he called the peace process "a responsibility that weighs not just upon the mind, but the soul."

So I understand the difficulties that the Government are facing. When we talk about elections in Northern Ireland, it is worth repeating that power-sharing, frustrating as it can be, is the essential and hard-won outcome of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and the principle of consent is fundamental to it. The fact that we have been without an Executive since February damages the agreement that we all cherish.

That has also hit public finances. The independent Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has made it clear that the lack of an Executive has made it harder to manage the pressure of inflation. The cost of living crisis is hitting Northern Ireland particularly hard, and the Government must urgently implement the support that they have promised. If they delay any further, they must give the people of Northern Ireland an explanation, beyond simply saying, "It's complicated."

The Labour party has taken a constructive approach to the challenges posed by the absence of devolution. We have called for any of the three Prime Ministers in that time to use their great office to bring parties together. Can the Secretary of State therefore confirm when the current Minister for the Union—who is also the Prime Minister—will visit Belfast? We have taken all parties on their own terms. Will the Secretary of State consider bringing all parties together in one room, so that they can hear the same message at the same time from him? We need everyone to be on the same page when it comes to the challenges that face Northern Ireland.

We have also put forward solutions to the outstanding issues with the Northern Ireland protocol. The politics, as well as the implementation, of the protocol are indivisible from the current impasse. Anyone who thinks differently is on a hiding to nothing. Even though the protocol forms part of a treaty between the UK and the EU, Northern Ireland is, by definition, on the frontline. The Unionist community perceive it as an existential threat, yet party leaders from both communities, and the Alliance party, tell me that they are not meaningfully updated, let alone consulted, on the UK's negotiations. The Secretary of State is still relatively new in his position. Will he turn a new page and find ways to bring Northern Ireland's parties together; to bring them in from the cold? Given that negotiations with the EU are so opaque, perhaps he could tell us whether they are finally trying for a veterinary agreement.



[Peter Kyle]

I met all the party leaders in the week before the 28 October deadline, and I do not think that what they said then has changed since. There is great hope that the nature of negotiations with the EU has changed, and that a deal is close. If that is indeed the case, the Government need to update the House regularly, and to keep us updated henceforth. Three Secretaries of State in six months was never likely to lead to a sustained effort to restore Stormont. Chaos has consequences. More than any other part of our country, Northern Ireland is reeling from the Tory dysfunction here in Westminster.

I have made it clear that I will support the Government in delaying elections in extreme circumstances, but we need to hear what the time will be used for. This is the crux of the matter. The Government wasted the last six months, so what will they do in the next few weeks that they have bought themselves that they did not do in the previous weeks? If the coming period is to be fruitful, something different needs to happen, so rather than our focusing on the technical aspects of date changes, I would like to hear more from the Secretary of State about what he intends to use that time for.

In the year since my appointment, this is the first statement on Northern Ireland, despite everything that has happened. Will the Secretary of State commit to keeping the House more updated, on a more regular basis, than his predecessors did?

Northern Ireland deserves more than uncertainty, limbo and neglect. The Labour party will always be an honest broker for Northern Ireland, and we will work tirelessly to find the stability that is necessary for a bright future shared by all.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive tone, and for the way in which we have worked together since I took over this role. I welcome the fact that he, too, noted the contents of the Fiscal Council's report—issued yesterday—and its explanation of what such a budget deficit means in real terms for Northern Ireland's finances, and the difficulties that it creates.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about bringing all the parties together, and I would be delighted to do so. The one thing that I suppose the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can do is convene, and there are many conversations to be had. I know that all the parties are very willing to talk to me, and I hope they are also very willing to talk to each other. So I shall certainly take that opportunity, but I also enjoy my individual conversations with them, and believe them to be very important indeed.

The hon. Gentleman asked about updating the House and the Northern Ireland parties on the ongoing negotiations on the EU protocol. First, it is not for me to update the House on those negotiations; it is the Foreign Secretary who is conducting those. Secondly, on the basis of my experience—I spent a decade in the European Parliament, and have now spent 12 years in this place—I reckon that it is probably quite unhelpful, in many respects, to provide a running commentary on negotiations. However, I understand the sentiment behind the hon. Gentleman's request, and I will ask the Foreign Secretary to see what can be done to offer appropriate briefings to the parties concerned.

The legislation that I will introduce is intended to create the time and space needed for the talks between the UK and the EU to develop, and for the Northern Ireland parties to work together to restore the devolved institutions as soon as possible. I think it only right that, as we move forward, I do update the House regularly on those matters.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Simon Hoare.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I welcome his proposals with regard to the pay cut, and I agree with him that now is the time for bravery, leadership and compromise, such as we saw during the period leading up to the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

My right hon. Friend said to the Select Committee recently, in relation to the rubric of the formation of the Executive, that there should be a bottom-up rather than a top-down review. May I ask him to reflect on that, given the impasse that we are in and given the more than desperate requirement for functioning devolution for the people of Northern Ireland at a time of high inflation, high interest rates and a high cost of living? Surely, in the 21st century, no one party should have a veto on devolution.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the Select Committee Chair for his words. That session before the Committee a few weeks ago was my first ever session as Secretary of State. I appreciate what he has said, in many ways, but the bedrock of the peace and prosperity that has flowed through Northern Ireland's veins for the last 25 years is the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and the three strands are absolutely clear about both consent and majorities.

I understand that various political parties, and indeed others, are now talking about how things might change in the future, and how reformation, as the hon. Gentleman put it, could occur. I know that those conversations are taking place. However, my job at this point—and I hope that this is what my statement does—is to ensure, as I keep reminding the House, that we have the time and the space that are necessary for the talks between the UK and the EU to develop, and for the Northern Ireland parties to work together to restore devolved institutions as soon as possible.

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

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I very much echo his sentiment that Northern Ireland is governed best when it is governed locally, but it is also important to recognise that government and politics in Northern Ireland work best when there are good and productive relations between London and Dublin, and between the UK and the European Union.

Northern Ireland has been in the unfortunate position of having both its Governments paralysed by inaction over the past few months, albeit for different reasons, but we have made clear our view that the best place for Members of the Legislative Assembly to be—and where the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland expect them to be—is at work in Stormont, holding a functioning Executive to account as it gets on with overseeing the delivery of vital public services. We do not think it serves the interests of people in Northern



Ireland for there not to be an Executive in place, but neither would it serve their interests to hold an election, which, if it achieved anything, would only be to further entrench already well-dug positions. We therefore look forward to the legislation on the period for Executive formation, to allow for essential decision making to take place in the meantime and to allow for some long overdue negotiations to take place.

While we have been clear that the protocol was a necessary measure to protect Northern Ireland from Brexit, we have also been clear that it is not unreasonable in the light of experience for the UK Government to try to renegotiate it. Does the Secretary of State agree that any new settlement on the protocol cannot only be about Northern Ireland and that a revised settlement will only be a better settlement if it eases trade for all parts of the UK, including the UK-EU export trading environment, rather than just trade between GB and Northern Ireland?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and his support. I completely echo his view that things work best when conversations are being had, whether in the Executive or the Assembly in Northern Ireland, or between London and Dublin—I would like to think that we have strongly reset that relationship in recent weeks—or indeed between the United Kingdom and the European Commission. Again, I would like to think that we have strongly reset that relationship in a good place in recent weeks. I understand his views about how we move forward. I believe the key to everything is to try to ensure that we get the appropriate, correct negotiated solution to the protocol. All things that flow from that will be beneficial for us all.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): I can see why the Secretary of State is seeking to reduce the salaries of MLAs at the present time. However, he has opened a bit of a can of worms here. Does he not think it ironic that Sinn Féin MPs are paid in full when they do not attend and take their seats in this House?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I understand the point that my hon. Friend has made and I will swerve well away from it.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State is making a statement under provisions laid out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, yet the only remaining part of that agreement that has not been implemented and honoured by this Government is the most important one of all: restoring Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market.

We have had legislation passed on language and identity, and other pieces of legislation, including the provisions that the Secretary of State draws upon today. We recognise that the Government have brought forward legislation on the protocol, which is welcome, and that negotiations are ongoing. The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is based on the principle of consensus and cross-community support. When I hear some Members in this House saying that no one party should have a veto and praising the Good Friday agreement, maybe they need to read the agreement again and recognise that it is cross-community. There was silence from some when Sinn Féin kept Northern Ireland without a Government for three years; nothing was said about removing the Sinn Féin veto, so let us be even-handed.

To conclude, I say to the Secretary of State that words such as “courage”, “understanding” and “compromise” are fine and good words, but what the people of Northern Ireland need now, the sooner the better, is a solution that sees the institutions restored on the basis that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, in line with article 1 of the Belfast agreement and with the Act of Union itself.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words and his questions. I hear exactly what he says. He details where legislation is in this place. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is, I believe, now in Committee in the House of Lords, unamended at this point. It is moving at good pace. This Government's preferred view is to have a negotiated solution with our European partners, but he can see what we are aiming for in the content of that Bill.

I also hear what the right hon. Gentleman says about the history—I have made that point myself to all those who have raised similar points with me because I am aware of it and of the responsibility that sits on my shoulders. I am also aware that the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement on 10 April could and should be a great day for Northern Ireland, its politics and its past, present and future. I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman on all those matters.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome the bipartisan tone of these exchanges; we need to look forward without blame and with hope in our hearts that we can restore power sharing and the working of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement as quickly as possible, but are we not learning something from the state of the Northern Ireland protocol? It has been in force for nearly three years but it has not been fully implemented and probably never will be. Might we not have to face the fact that, for as long as the protocol exists and applies EU law in Northern Ireland directly, it is increasingly unlikely that power sharing will be restored in Northern Ireland? Do we not need to look more grandly and strategically at this question with the Republic of Ireland, with our American allies, with the European Union and with all the parties in Northern Ireland about how to restore the functioning of the Good Friday agreement?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I concur with the sentiment behind my hon. Friend's question. He has mentioned a whole host of important interlocutors in this space. Drawing on my experience of European institutions, I do not believe that the protocol was written in malice. I believe that it was written in a way that people believed would work. However, the practicalities of it are obvious to all in Northern Ireland in many different ways. Even its partial application is disrupting goods and the way people can go about their business, and it has had serious ramifications for consumers and businesses across Northern Ireland, so it absolutely does need to be reformed. This is now recognised by all the parties in all negotiations.

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): May I say at the outset that I was never quiet when Sinn Féin kept the institutions of the Good Friday agreement down? I will challenge any party that tries to stop the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland being properly implemented.

[*Colum Eastwood*]

I thank the Secretary of State for recognising that an election at this time is a bad idea and would make things worse rather than better, and for recognising that an arrangement will have to be put in place in the absence of an Executive, but does he not agree that it is pretty shameful, in the middle of winter when people and businesses are panicking about their bills, that one party is preventing a Government from being formed in Northern Ireland so that we can deal with those issues? Surely now is the time to put these arrangements aside, have a DUP Deputy First Minister go into Stormont and have an Executive to deal with the priorities of the people.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I believe that it would require quite a leap of faith for that to happen at this time, and I have to deal with the reality of the situation that we find ourselves in. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, a huge swathe of the Unionist community has found its lives disrupted and really worries about the implications there. I completely understand his sentiment, because there are also important issues—energy and a whole host of other things—that affect every single person in Northern Ireland. That is why I am bringing forward legislation to create, I hope, the time and space—as I will say time and again—for the UK and the European Union to develop their talks and for the parties to work together in the hope that we can restore the devolved institutions as soon as possible.

**Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** I am glad the Secretary of State appears to agree with me that elections will not solve anything, because they are not the problem. The problem is that we need fundamental change to the Northern Ireland protocol, not least because the protocol challenges the very principles of fairness and of a shared future in Northern Ireland. When the Foreign Office negotiates with Europe, will it insist, at the very least, on the equivalence of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which is currently going through the House of Lords?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** My hon. Friend has rich experience in this area, and I recognise everything he has done for Northern Ireland past and present.

I think it is fair to say that everybody recognises the seriousness of the situation between the negotiating partners. Indeed, maintaining and protecting the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and its provisions was at the core of the European Union's original negotiating mandate. Things have slightly changed with the protocol, which is why the negotiations need to move forward. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill demonstrates where we want to get to in our relationship with Europe, and I believe some of these aspects are now well recognised.

**Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** Nobody is asking for a running commentary on the protocol negotiations. Three years on, "running" is hardly the expression any of us would use. It is important that we now create trust between the European Commission and the UK Government because, in the end, the protocol must be made to work, which will need compromise on all parts. The gap is very small, but it has to be bridged. Are the Government prepared to make that effort?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Through this statement and the forthcoming legislation, I will be creating the time and space needed for the talks to develop. On behalf of another Secretary of State, I have made commitments about updating the various parties. I will try to make sure we keep to those commitments.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** In this period of remembrance, I seek an assurance from the Secretary of State that, whatever the outcome of this necessary delay to the elections issue, he will stand fast by the legislation sponsored by his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), to incorporate a statute of limitation in the truth recovery process as a way of ensuring an end to the repeated reinvestigation of former service personnel who served during the troubles? That measure was first recommended by the Select Committee on Defence in April 2017, and all other alternatives have been found to be useless.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** There were a number of questions on this at oral questions, but I am not sure if my right hon. Friend was in his place. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill is about to have its Second Reading in the other place, and I look forward to working with everyone to make sure it gets to the right place. Lots of people are not happy with that Bill, and I tried to explain to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) earlier that it will never please everyone. However, I believe we can improve that Bill through the parliamentary process in the other place to encompass both its critics and its supporters. That will make the Bill a whole lot better.

**Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab):** The British-Irish relationship has been somewhat problematic for a couple of centuries, rather than just since 2006. The Secretary of State is in for a long haul. This is the easy bit, because we have not yet diverged from the European Union. Brexit has divided the island and, as the UK seeks to diverge, there will be more problems of this nature. He referred to the three strands of the Good Friday agreement, and he needs to make sure those three strands are fully implemented to help us through both this crisis and the forthcoming crisis. What action does he propose to take with regard to strands 2 and 3?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I intend to spend a lot of time working on all three strands. I would like to think the hon. Lady has already noticed a complete change in tone, emphasis and friendship between the Government of Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom. How we work is based on respect and trust, which is what I intend to bring to all my relationships both with institutions based on the three strands and with those outside the strands.

**Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con):** It is never easy to be Northern Ireland Secretary but, with the current impasse, it would be no wonder if my right hon. Friend thought back fondly on his time as Chief Whip as a time of relative simplicity. I welcome the clarity he has provided today on the opportunity for more dialogue, reconciliation and compromise. Does he agree that all parties, including the UK Government, the EU and the parties in Northern Ireland, must use this time to break

the stalemate and to ensure the Executive is restored in time for the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am not sure whether I look back fondly on those times, but they were certainly very interesting. I had already lost my hair, so it is difficult to judge.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We now have time and space both to reflect and to understand everyone's position. The Unionist community in Northern Ireland has articulated a principled position with reference to issues with the protocol, which I completely understand. To fix it, we need time and space to have those discussions with our European Commission interlocutors. That is part of what I hope to do with the forthcoming legislation.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is welcome that, latterly, the EU has seen the error of its ways and is showing a willingness to negotiate the wrongs of the Northern Ireland protocol with our Government. Seed potatoes, plants and medical supplies are no threat to the EU, so the restrictions are designed solely to punish the UK for voting to leave. Will the Secretary of State confirm to my constituents that the Government remain committed to achieving the same outcome through negotiations as would be delivered through the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, as promised by the former Prime Minister?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all agree that life and progress cannot stop for people in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State says he will take powers over public service delivery. He will recall the statement he made on 24 October, in which he accepted responsibility for ensuring that women in Northern Ireland can access their human right to a safe, legal and local abortion. He said it was for the Northern Ireland Executive to fund that service.

Women in Northern Ireland have now had three years of various Secretaries of State exchanging letters, rattling and saying that, somehow, this is going to happen, yet it has not happened. Given that the Secretary of State has these powers, can he now tell us the date on which a woman in Northern Ireland, if she so chooses, will be able to access a safe, legal and local abortion?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I cannot give the hon. Lady that date, because a bit more needs to be done. I have said that I hope to meet the commissioners of services in the next week or so, and I will be writing to the directors of finance in the trusts to ensure, hopefully, that the money flows so they can start to build up the required services.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): Frankly, there is no excuse for the Executive not to function at present. Even a deal with the European Union in the coming weeks might not be enough for some. The Good Friday agreement allows for its own review, so does the Secretary of State accept that we need to end the cycle of ransom politics and vetoes and to ensure that the institutions are restored on a sustainable basis? Indeed, if the choice boils down to continued deadlock or direct rule, what is wrong with considering reform to allow those parties that wish to govern to do so?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I will comment on the here and now, if I may, because the legislation I am bringing forward will create the time and space needed for the talks between the UK and the EU to develop and for the Northern Ireland parties to work together to restore the devolved institutions as soon as possible. I have had conversations with the hon. Gentleman's party leader, who I know is enthused by the prospect of having a debate on the evolution of institutions in Northern Ireland. I tend to think that is a political debate to be framed in Northern Ireland by voices from Northern Ireland, and I will listen to it carefully in the coming months.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): The delay to the elections is clearly sensible, but it deals only with the symptoms. We are told that technical discussions are taking place on the protocol, but we all know that this is a political problem that requires a political solution. So will the Secretary of State assure the House that the time that he is now making available will be used for intensive political negotiations with the EU to find that landing zone that he has said he believes there to be—I agree with him—so that the institutions in Northern Ireland can get up and running again?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I think the right hon. Gentleman will be pleased with the pace and sincerity with which negotiations and talks will continue in the coming weeks.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment that there will be no consideration of joint authority. May I mildly castigate the Northern Ireland Office for the 48-hour hiatus when it left that question hanging two weeks ago, with no clarification given? It is a welcome commitment given on the Floor of the House today. If he is extending that commitment into considering the three-stranded approach within the Belfast agreement, was he as bemused as I was to see the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic last Monday indicate that any reforms would have to involve and be predicated upon the agreement of the Irish Republic? The Secretary of State knows that is a breach of strand 1. Does he accept that to facilitate the Irish Government having such a role would represent the joint authority he has just ruled out?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** It is kind of the hon. Gentleman to admonish my Department. I think he will find—that this is a problem that politicians have—that I did stand outside the Northern Ireland Department and knock back joint authority within a few hours of it being mooted, but I had also said a couple of other things that seemed to catch the public's eye rather than that. Our focus is on ensuring that the institutions in Northern Ireland are able to deliver on the priorities of its people, which means that our first priority must be restoring the Executive. The people of Northern Ireland deserve a stable and accountable devolved Government and we will continue to work tirelessly to secure that objective. I hear what he says about other commentators. He will understand that there is a massive international focus on what is going on in Northern Ireland. I, like him, intend to ensure that all strands of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement continue to be agreed to.

**Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): We believe strongly and hope that a fair deal is available between the EU and the UK that will satisfy all people of all



[*Claire Hanna*]

identities and all economic sectors, if parties will just lead and compromise, and not spend their time on misinformation and disinformation. I believe that that is what the people of Northern Ireland want. For many years, people of my background faced the jibe that we did not want to make Northern Ireland work. We desperately do, but, unfortunately, the party in front of me, the Democratic Unionist party, will not allow that at the moment. Let us consider the following:

“it is wrong...in a democracy, that one party, representing...25% of the people, is able to veto the establishment of a Government. That is not democracy”.

Those are not my words but the words of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), whose party represents 21.3% of the voters. Will the Minister confirm that he will allow the exploration by all parties, in a transparent and inclusive way, of reforms of the Assembly, if necessary, to incentivise compromise and allow those of us who want to serve the people to do so together?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am new to my glasses and when I looked up as the hon. Lady was talking about the people in front of her, I saw the Lib Dem Member here, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and I thought, “I am so sorry that you have been holding up so much progress in Northern Ireland for some time.” He is a great man so he will understand the point. I hear what the hon. Lady says. I will not be stopping any debate on anything. The one thing I have learnt quickly in Northern Ireland is that it is impossible to stop any sort of conversation or debate, so I will not even be trying.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the Secretary of State for missing the start of his statement. I promise him that when I have the sort of influence that he ascribes to me he will certainly know about it.

I cannot believe that an agreement that involves the operation of the d’Hondt formula and community designations was ever intended to be permanent. We all knew, however, that everybody would sign up to it because it was the best workable solution at the time. When it has stopped working, it is difficult to see how we can still call it the best workable solution. That is why, surely, if we cannot restore the good faith that is necessary to see the operation of a functioning Executive, we have to look at it from first principles again.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I have been reading up on the history of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The right hon. Gentleman will know this, and I do not mean it glibly, but it was not a very easy process to get to the point it got to. It did involve huge sacrifices of personal and political capital by some very well-respected and great men, some of whom have been honoured internationally. But I really think we can get the institutions up and running again. There is a problem we have to solve to help that, which is the reformation of the protocol, and hard work is ongoing to try to achieve that.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): It is a great shame for the people of Northern Ireland, in these most challenging of times, to have clearly expressed their democratic will and to now find themselves continually ungoverned.

May I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on two things? First, in his statement, he talks about reducing MLA salaries. That would be a comprehensive sanction where refusal to form an Administration seems less than comprehensive. Secondly, this hugely complex and challenging dynamic is a direct consequence of Brexit, which was not properly transacted in this place prior to our leaving the EU, and it is now the people of Northern Ireland, of all communities, who are paying the most weighty price for that failure to govern properly.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I humbly push back on the second part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I completely understand what he says about the action I plan to take on MLA pay. Actually, the course of action I intend to take on MLA pay has been done before and has a legal basis, so I feel comfortable that I will be able to do it. However, I understand the points that he made.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is a matter for the Secretary of State if he wishes to call or not to call an election and legislate here in this House for that purpose. He brought the focus on to himself. Does he recognise that Unionism is ready to renew and strengthen our mandate, but only when the protocol is replaced with arrangements that Unionists support and are behind? It will be an election for nothing, as he and others have said, and elections are the bedrock of democracy, but, unlike others, we will readily take our case to the electorate and win again.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I completely understand what the hon. Gentleman states, but the election was not brought by me; it was brought by the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022, following the cross-party agreement—I know that the Ulster Unionist party did not agree to it—from New Decade, New Approach. The timings are all set out in there. What happened was that the legal duty fell to me and it still sits on my shoulders. I have outlined what I intend to do as we move forward. It is an interesting thing when politicians are keen to have elections. We all say things about being keen about something, but I would not want to wish a Christmas election on the good people of Northern Ireland, which is why I have brought forward these measures today.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The UK voted for Brexit, but not to leave the single market—just to leave the political union—and Northern Ireland did neither, so will the Government consider the UK converging with a view to eventually re-joining the single market, so that the Good Friday agreement and peace are protected, Northern Ireland governance is resumed, trade is supported and international law is respected?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The hon. Gentleman is wrong and he needs to move on.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I agree with the Secretary of State that we need to get devolved Government restored to Northern Ireland, although he must understand that the basis of restoring devolved Government is that the terms for that Government to be restored have to be adhered to, namely, that the principle of consent is adhered to and accepted, and of course, no Unionist who would have to implement the

agreement in the Assembly is prepared to do so. I do not share the Secretary of State's optimism, by the way, that it would solve all the economic problems. The £600 million hole in the budget was caused by the Assembly when it was sitting and could not agree a budget, so I would not be too optimistic about that. However, can he give me an assurance about the promise made by the Prime Minister? He said:

"Under my leadership, the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill will continue to make its way through Parliament. If negotiation with the EU doesn't deliver what we need it to, the bill will become law."

The Bill required that European Court of Justice jurisdiction in Northern Ireland be removed, that EU law would no longer apply in Northern Ireland, except for those firms that volunteered, and that the trade restrictions would be removed. Can he assure us that that is what he needs to see from the negotiations with the EU?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The very simple answer is to say yes, but, as we were reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) just a moment ago, as Chief Whip, I used to enjoy my weekly conversations with the right hon. Gentleman and we talked about these points a great deal, so he knows and would understand that I will always prefer to have a negotiated outcome. I believe that that is possible, but what the Prime Minister said about the Bill remains so.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): How is the Secretary of State going to address the issue of the public sector pay deals that have not been implemented in Northern Ireland? Will that be addressed as part of the legislation coming before this House?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** As the Northern Ireland Office has only been in receipt of, essentially, the books for the Executive for a very short period, we are yet to get to the point where we can clarify numbers exactly. But the hon. Member will have seen both from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council and the Northern Ireland Finance Minister, when in post, the size of the problem that is

being inherited, we could say. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), stated the position in Northern Ireland questions earlier and I should refer her to his quite long and detailed answer. However, as no budget was set, the Northern Ireland Health Minister, when in post, was unable to do what he wrote to me to ask me to do when he left post. I will do everything that I possibly can, but I currently am not in possession of all the facts. I do not know where the black hole extends to and how deep it is, but I will come back to the hon. Member when I have full details.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I was surprised that the Secretary of State did not correct the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), who said that Sinn Féin MPs receive their salaries. Of course, quite rightly, they do not receive their salaries because they do not come and do their work in this House. The current impasse is affecting this House. I served on the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2022 on Monday, but it applied only to Great Britain, as Northern Ireland's part of that important measure for the environment could not be implemented because of the lack of the working institutions in Northern Ireland. Unfortunate as it is if he is going to dock the pay of MLAs, particularly those who are willing to do their full shift, what percentage is he intending to dock from their pay?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he was on the Order Paper earlier today and did not get to ask his question of me then. I had a fairly witty riposte, which I will use next time. However, based on the precedent that I talked about earlier—when the late James Brokenshire was Secretary of State, we went through this process and there was a review—the percentage that I would be looking at would be the same as then, which was 27.5%.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today and for responding to questions for 52 minutes.

## Points of Order

2.24 pm

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have informed the Members I am going to name that I intend to raise this point of order. At Prime Minister's questions earlier today, the Prime Minister told the House that he was not aware, until yesterday, of any specific allegations against the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson). However, the former Conservative Party chairman, the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry), publicly said that he informed the Prime Minister of a complaint that had been made regarding allegations of bullying and intimidation of parliamentary colleagues by the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire well in advance of that. Can you, Mr Deputy Speaker, inform us whether the Prime Minister has given any indication that he intends to return to the House to correct the record? I know that Mr Speaker is extremely keen that statements made to this House should be accurate and truthful.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. He is absolutely right: that is exactly what the Speaker believes. I have been given no indication that a statement is going to be made by the Prime Minister today, but those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order and I am sure that they will pass it on to him.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD) *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Layla Moran. Sorry, it is Daisy Cooper. There is a reason why I am thinking of Layla Moran.

**Daisy Cooper:** It is not the hair, is it?

On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think the House will agree that freedom of the press is of paramount importance to a free and fair society. I was utterly appalled to see LBC journalist Charlotte Lynch being arrested by Hertfordshire police yesterday while covering the Just Stop Oil protests on the M25 in my constituency. Other journalists were also detained covering separate similar protests in Hertfordshire. While being questioned by the police, Ms Lynch offered her press badge immediately but, within two minutes, she was handcuffed, her phone was snatched away, she was taken to a police station and accused of conspiracy to commit a public nuisance. She was fingerprinted, photographed and had DNA samples taken. I have written to Hertfordshire police today and they have now put out a statement. They have said that they have requested an independent force to examine their approach to identify some learnings and that they are taking some additional measures. In other words, nothing to see here.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are not an authoritarian state. The ability of journalists to do their job unhindered is a vital part of our democracy. Given the severity of these incidents and the fact that Parliament is going into recess tomorrow, can you please give me some advice as to how the House may be able to summon the Home Secretary to this place for her to give a statement offering an explanation, an apology and a reassurance that this will never happen again?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I have not had any indication from the Home Secretary that she is coming here today to make a statement. Again, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the points that she has raised. I know that she will not leave the matter there and will continue to pursue it. Clearly, I cannot comment on any policing decisions and actions, which are not a matter for the Chair.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The list of ministerial responsibilities is the document that Members on both sides of the House and their staff turn to to contact Ministers' private offices when organising meetings and sending correspondence, so that we can serve and fight for our constituents and communities. However, this list of contacts has not been updated since May. There have been multiple iterations of this Government in that period, but there have actually been some moments when we have had a full set of Ministers in that period. More than a month ago, the Cabinet Office responded to my written question to say that it would be done "in due course", but that is not an answer. Members are having to guess phone numbers and email addresses for ministerial offices. It is not impossible to do that, but they really should not have to. Can you advise me, Mr Deputy Speaker, as to when the list of ministerial responsibilities will be updated so that Members and our staff can get on with the work that we are here to do on behalf of our constituents and our communities?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order and I have much sympathy for it, as I am sure everybody in the Chamber does. I am not responsible for the issues he raises, but again, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard them, and I believe it would be useful for all Members if the production of the list happened as speedily as possible.

The reason I was thinking of Layla Moran is that she is not presenting her Bill today—she will do so on another day. I do apologise again, Daisy.

## BILL PRESENTED

### PLASTICS (RECYCLING, SUSTAINABILITY AND POLLUTION REDUCTION) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Geraint Davies, supported by Rosie Duffield, Tony Lloyd, Caroline Lucas, Tim Farron, John McNally, Rachael Maskell, Dawn Butler, Ian Byrne, Christine Jardine, Beth Winter and Mohammad Yasin, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for promoting a circular economy in respect of plastics, including setting targets and measures for the elimination and recycling of single-use plastics; to require the Secretary of State to establish a taskforce to develop proposals to encourage the use of reuse and refill models of packaging; to require the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on the implementation of the strategy; to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that UK targets for the elimination and recycling of plastic packaging are more demanding than equivalent targets set by the European Union; to require manufacturers and retailers to pay for the cost of recycling plastic; to



require the Government to set annual targets for reducing the quantity of plastic waste that is incinerated; to require the Secretary of State to publish a plan for banning the export of plastic waste by 2027; to make provision for the purpose of reducing the cost of recycling plastic, including measures to encourage the standardisation of plastic packaging; to give powers to the Office for Environmental Protection to enforce legislation relating to plastic pollution; to make provision for the purpose of encouraging the development of sustainable alternatives to plastic packaging; to require the Government to publish a plan for the use of fiscal policy to incentivise investment in recycling infrastructure and sustainable behaviour by consumers and retailers in relation to plastic; to require the Government to publish a plan for agreeing a global treaty on plastic pollution reduction; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 186).*

## Sale of Tobacco (Licensing)

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

2.30 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the sale by retail of tobacco and related goods; and for connected purposes.

In the Backbench Business debate last week the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who I see is in his place, restated the Government's commitment to making England smoke free by 2030. However, as he knows, we are not on track. Indeed, according to the most up-to-date data on smoking prevalence published by University College London, smoking rates have flattened since 2020. If the Government are serious about achieving a smoke free 2030, then the status quo is not sufficient.

Ratcheting up regulations and closing loopholes is crucial to any serious plan to support smokers in quitting and to prevent young people from starting to smoke. Requiring tobacco retailers to be licensed to sell tobacco would be a major step forward. That is not just my view; it is also the view of Javed Khan OBE, who recommended tobacco retail licensing in his independent review of smoke free 2030 policies earlier this year.

It has long been the case that to sell alcohol in England retailers must possess a licence, which is registered with their local authority. If a retailer breaks the conditions of the licence, for example by selling alcohol to someone aged under 18, their licence can be revoked, preventing them from selling alcohol legally and depriving them of revenue. That is crucial in helping to reduce under-age sales, as well as in preventing the vast majority of law-abiding retailers from being undercut by an irresponsible few.

Cigarettes, which are much more harmful and addictive than alcohol, require no such licence. Smoking killed around 78,000 people in England in 2020, while alcohol was directly responsible for around 7,000 deaths. Two thirds of those who try just one cigarette go on to become addicted daily smokers and the vast majority of those dying from smoking each year were addicted as children. The latest survey by Action on Smoking and Health found that 60% of child smokers buy their cigarettes from shops, yet there is no requirement for retailers to have a licence to sell tobacco, which kills its users.

This Bill would rectify that egregious gap in the regulation of retailers, meeting an important recommendation in Javed Khan's independent review into making smoking obsolete. He recommended that a retail licensing scheme should be rolled out nationally and administered by local authorities. The cost of the licence should be determined by each local authority, with a national minimum set.

Javed Khan also recommended that criminal retailers who break the regulations or fail to carry out age verification should lose the tobacco licence for their premises. Any loopholes for transferring licences to new names or to alternative premises should be closed. Selling tobacco without a licence must be an offence attracting heavy financial penalties, and local authorities

[Bob Blackman]

must be able to attach public health criteria to the licence, such as prohibiting sales near schools, requiring the sale of less harmful alternatives and displaying stop smoking advice on retail premises.

Those recommendations all seem very sensible and I support them. Requiring tobacco retailers to be licensed could help to prevent sales to children and sales of illicit tobacco by giving local authorities greater powers to take effective action against those who do not adhere to the regulations. Retail licensing would also protect honest small businesses up and down the country, which sell only tax paid products to adults, but are undercut every day by those willing to sell smuggled tobacco to anybody who wants it—an illicit trade run by criminal gangs, with dishonest retailers acting as their conduit to the public.

This measure would be relatively simple to implement. Retailers are used to complying with alcohol licensing schemes and are already required to have an economic operator ID before they can trade in tobacco under tobacco tracking and tracing regulations. However, the current system is not designed to be used for enforcement at point of sale by trading standards, which is why further regulation is needed.

Retail licensing is the obvious back up to the tracking and tracing of cigarettes and would help to tackle the illicit trade in this country, which gives smokers access to cheap tobacco. Those who sell illegal tobacco have no compunction about selling it to children, so the illegal trade makes it not only less likely that smokers will quit, but more likely that children will start smoking.

Retailers are not anti-regulation; they know that good regulation can make their lives easier by ensuring a level playing field and protecting the health of their customers. That is why survey findings published last week in a new report from Action on Smoking and Health and the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, titled “Regulation is not a dirty word”, found that more than eight in 10 of local retailers support the introduction of a tobacco licence, backed up by mandatory age verification. Licensing is also supported by more than eight in 10 members of the public, with only 3% opposed.

Under the current system, stretched trading standards teams are left with few options for identifying and cracking down on retailers who repeatedly flout tobacco regulations. Retail licensing backed up by mandatory age verification would give councils a critical new tool for preventing under-age sales and illicit tobacco.

Currently there is only a voluntary scheme in place, Challenge 25—not a legal requirement, as it has been in Scotland since 2017. It is very unusual for me to praise Scotland, I know, but the system in Scotland is supported by over 90% of retailers. There is a range of ID that young people can use, including the UK’s national proof of age accreditation scheme, endorsed by the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs Council and the Security Industry Authority. Unlike in England, in Scotland retailers cannot get away with saying they did not realise someone was under age. Introducing the same system in England would make enforcement easier for trading standards.

The current system leaves councils with one hand tied behind their backs in the fight against illicit tobacco and under-age sales. To quote John Herriman, chief executive of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute,

“Trading Standards professionals deal with tobacco retailers every day, and we know that the majority of them are law abiding, and understand the need for increased enforcement to stop unscrupulous traders willing to sell cheap and illicit tobacco, and to sell to children. A mandatory licence to sell tobacco and age verification for anyone who looks under 25 would make it easier for trading standards to enforce the law, to the benefit of reputable retailers.”

I am sure hon. Members across this House will agree that it is time we caught up with our friends in Scotland. The Government should listen to retailers, to trading standards officers and to the public and get on with introducing these popular and sensible measures without delay.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Bob Blackman, Mary Kelly Foy, Alex Cunningham, Dr Dan Poulter, Maggie Throup, Mr Virendra Sharma, Steve Brine, Liz Twist and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Bob Blackman accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 187).*

## Backbench Business

### Sri Lanka

2.40 pm

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned by reports of increased militarisation and human rights violations in Sri Lanka, particularly during the country's current economic crisis; calls upon the Government, as a key stakeholder of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to propose conditionalities on any IMF financial assistance for Sri Lanka during the current economic crisis, including that Sri Lanka carries out a Strategic Defence and Security Review to reduce its military spending and remove the military from engaging in commercial activities, that Sri Lanka meets the criteria required for Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus, and that Sri Lanka re-engages with the United Nations Human Rights Council process and fully implements resolution 30/1; and calls upon the Government to implement targeted sanctions against individuals who are credibly accused of committing war crimes during the Sri Lankan Civil War.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this important debate. I thank in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), as well as the dozens of other colleagues who sponsored the application for this debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils and as a Member of Parliament representing thousands of Tamil constituents in Carshalton and Wallington. I thank those constituents who reached out to me to talk more about the situation in Sri Lanka, as well as the various community groups we have heard from in the APPG since the Parliament was reformed in 2019.

It has been more than 13 years since the civil war came to an end, and the origins of that conflict stretch back several decades. It resulted in well over 100,000 deaths from all sides. However, it was the final months of the conflict in 2009 that saw things take a particularly bloody turn for the worse. During that period, the Sri Lankan military deliberately targeted thousands of civilian lives, committing grotesque genocidal acts, war crimes and crimes against humanity, largely against the Tamil population of the island.

The culmination of these atrocities was the Mullivaikkal massacre. In 2009, a strip of land in Mullivaikkal was designated as a so-called no fire zone. These were designated areas where civilians were told to gather to avoid being harmed. However, nothing could have been further from the truth. Sri Lankan Government forces entrapped tens of thousands of civilians in the zone and committed heinous war crimes. After providing an initial death toll of 40,000, the United Nations found evidence suggesting that as many as 70,000 were killed. Local census records indicate that at least 146,679 people are still unaccounted for and are presumed to have been killed. By examining different sources, including the United Nations, census figures and World Bank data, the International Truth and Justice Project has found that the highest estimate of those killed during that final phase could be as large as 169,796. Most of those deaths were as a result of the Sri Lankan Government forces shelling civilian buildings,

including hospitals. There were also reports of civilian bunkers being targeted with grenades, people being run over by military vehicles and surrendering civilians being stripped naked and executed.

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member on his brave and accurate speech. Would he agree with me that all the things he has cited about the bombing of hospitals, the bombing of people on the beach and the targeting of Tamils fits the definition of genocide?

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with her. One of the shocking things we have heard—she will know this as a member of the APPG—is that those credibly accused of committing these war crimes have been, have recently been or still are serving at the top level of Sri Lankan society. That is absolutely shocking, but I will come on to some more of that in my speech.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for securing this important debate, because many of my constituents are extremely concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their loved ones, given the reports of increased militarisation and human rights violations, particularly when the country is going through a severe economic crisis. Does he agree that, as friends of Sri Lanka, we all have a duty to stand by that country in its time of need and impress upon its new Government the need to promote peace, justice and a brighter future for all, regardless of people's background, colour or creed?

**Elliot Colburn:** I absolutely agree. I am very glad that the Government have decided to support the motion today, so that we can get to work on bringing everyone back around the table, because we have seen so little progress on implementing UN resolutions so far. There is a lot of hopelessness out there, particularly among the Tamil community, that any progress will be made. We need to get on top of this and use our position as a friend of Sri Lanka to do just that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention.

If I may, I will talk a little bit more about some of the violence and atrocities used during the end of the conflict. Rape and sexual violence against Tamil women and, in some reports, against Tamil men during the final stages of the armed conflict and in its aftermath are also considered to be greatly under-reported. That is according to an investigation by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights into Sri Lanka. Several witnesses have spoken about women being taken away towards the jungle by soldiers, allegedly for sexual abuse, as they crossed over into Government-controlled territory.

An investigation by Human Rights Watch reported on one woman's experience. She said:

"The army made us strip completely in front of the children. All the women were made to walk around the soldiers in a circle. The soldiers were laughing at us. All the women were then raped in front of everyone. My daughter and I were raped in front of her children. I was raped in front of my grandchildren. After about two hours, the soldiers asked a naked boy and girl, who didn't know each other, to hug each other at gunpoint. As they hugged due to fear, they were shot in front of our eyes."



[*Elliot Colburn*]

These atrocities did not take place during a medieval skirmish hundreds of years ago; they took place in a Commonwealth country in 2009. Many of my constituents and those of other Members in this place have suffered to this day because of the crimes that they saw or were subjected to. The physical and mental scars are still there. Thirteen years later, these families are still waiting for peace, justice, truth and accountability.

I am pleased that last month the UN Human Rights Council adopted resolution 51/L1 on Sri Lanka, which will extend and reinforce the capacity of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve evidence that may be used in future war crimes trials. The Sri Lankan Government have rejected this resolution, as they have previously, instead claiming confidence in their domestic mechanisms, which 13 years on from the end of the war are yet to produce any results for the victims of the atrocities. The new resolution certainly is a step in the right direction to achieving justice and accountability, but—with respect—we have had resolutions before. International action at the Human Rights Council on its own is not enough. The resolution falls short of providing a mechanism to truly investigate war crimes and pursue criminal accountability.

Specific resources need to be raised to build cases against those who are accused of war crimes and to prosecute them. Criminal accountability should be pursued by referral to the International Criminal Court. Those who commit war crimes should not enjoy immunity because the state in question is unwilling or unable to prosecute them. Furthermore, the UK should follow other allies around the world, particularly the United States, in introducing a targeted sanctions regime for those who are credibly accused of committing war crimes and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

That should include notable Sri Lankan individuals, such as Shavendra Silva, a current army commander. General Silva stands credibly accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity during the final phases of the conflict. The accused war criminal was head of the notorious 58 Division during the conflict. In his experience as a commander, he oversaw the unit committing grave violations of international law. Under his command, hospitals were repeatedly bombed and widespread sexual violence occurred, as well as the torture and executions of surrendering Tamils. Eyewitnesses also demonstrated that he was present at the Wadduvakkal bridge, where, according to the available evidence, he oversaw hundreds of surrendering Tamil military and political leaders and their families being subjected to summary execution and arbitrary detention, as well as enforced disappearance.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. The implementation of vague laws to facilitate arbitrary arrests and the restriction of movement on citizens is something we see in countries with poor human rights records. Such laws in Sri Lanka make it much harder for those wrongly arrested to challenge detention. Does he share my concern that access to justice is being actively hindered, which leaves activists at too great a risk?

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful for that intervention. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member, but I would add an extra layer to that. The difficulty in Sri Lanka is not just that people are being held on false pretences and false charges, but that a gravely high number of people are still missing. We do not know where they are or where they are being held, so we cannot help them. If they are still alive, there is no way to help them. That is the grave situation that islanders are facing at the moment.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recommended that states, including the UK, sanction Silva and other alleged perpetrators in Sri Lanka, as the United States did in 2020. Another individual worth noting is Kamal Gunaratne, who is the current Defence Secretary in Sri Lanka. In February 2009, he led the final assault from the south on the beaches at Mullivaikkal as the 53 Division commander. The assault involved repeated attacks on civilian hospitals, makeshift hospitals and food distribution points, and resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. He was also in charge of displaced persons while hundreds of thousands of civilians were held in arbitrary detention after the end of the war, and he was commander of the Joseph army camp, which was notorious for torture.

By sanctioning those two individuals and many others, the UK Government would support UN and US action in demonstrating that alleged perpetrators of mass atrocities are not welcome in the UK. Members of the APPG for Tamils have raised this issue multiple times in the Chamber, as well as privately and through other channels with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, so I hope that the Minister will today provide an encouraging update on the Government's position regarding the sanctioning of individuals credibly accused of war crimes.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this debate. I am minded of the fact that although the officers give the commands, the soldiers who carry them out are also accountable. When it comes to having their time in court, which we hope they will, does he agree that it is important to do everything to catch those soldiers as well? The generals can be caught, because they are big names, but the soldiers need to know that they cannot get away with it either.

**Elliot Colburn:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. I hope that the UK sees that the new resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Council about collecting evidence should indeed include the specific soldiers who committed those atrocities as well.

The past atrocities that occurred in Sri Lanka are only one of the reasons we are having this debate. The second part of the motion is about the current economic and political instability there. The country is suffering its worst economic crisis since gaining independence in 1948. It defaulted on \$51 billion of external debt in mid-April and is in talks with the International Monetary Fund for a \$2.9 billion bailout.

Due to a shortage of hard currency to pay for imports, there have been shortages of basic necessities, including medicines, cooking gas, fuel and food, so 3.4 million people are now in need of urgent humanitarian help on the island. UN agencies working in Sri Lanka announced yesterday that they had raised \$79 million to feed those in need, but the increasing number of those in need means that another estimated \$70 million is needed.

In July, the new President imposed a state of emergency after his predecessor fled the country and resigned from his post following massive anti-Government protests about the Government's mishandling of the economy, which threw the country into further instability. The FCDO updated its travel advice over the summer to advise against all but essential travel to the island, due to the political and economic instability. The causes of Sri Lanka's financial crisis are multifaceted.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that military spending in Sri Lanka is higher now than it was at the height of the civil war? Surely that expenditure is contributing to the debt crisis that the country is facing.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention; she has been a doughty champion in this place for the Tamil population for many years and I thank her for lending her expertise to this debate. I hope to come on to that point later.

The failure to include Tamils in economic activity, a large defence budget that supports a disproportionately large military—as my right hon. Friend mentioned—corruption and, of course, poor fiscal policies have led Sri Lanka's economy to the brink of bankruptcy. For Sri Lanka to be rescued, it needs to reduce its military spending, which stands at \$1.86 billion per annum. That makes it one of the largest militaries in the world and costs more than its health and education budgets combined.

The militarisation of the country is also firmly linked to the deteriorating human rights situation on the island. The Prevention of Terrorism Act has been used to target predominately Muslim and Tamil communities, resulting in arbitrary detention, sexual torture and enforced disappearances. In fact, Sri Lanka has the second highest number of UN-registered enforced disappearances in the world, most of whom are Tamils.

Furthermore, the Sri Lankan military is engaged in commercial activities in the north-east, including tourism, farming and fishing, which stifles the local economy and prevents Tamils from contributing to economic activity in any meaningful way. That needs to be stopped to allow for regional economic regeneration. Sri Lanka also needs to conduct a strategic defence and security review, similar to the one that the UK completed in 2021, to ensure that its military size reflects its security requirements.

All of Sri Lanka's projections for emerging out of the economic crisis are predicated on the country retaining its generalised scheme of preferences and trade concession. That annual trade concession is worth more than \$500 million and has boosted Sri Lanka's exports to EU member states over the years. However, Sri Lanka has failed to meet the key labour and human rights requirements for receiving that preferential treatment, and the EU recently issued a warning that it is set to lose its concession if it continues to ignore its obligations.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing the debate and raising such important matters. Does he agree that it is vital for the UK Government to demonstrate support for Sri Lanka's fair and just development through our trade policy with Sri Lanka and how we secure our trade agreements?

**Elliot Colburn:** The hon. Member has taken my next words out of my mouth, so I am grateful for that intervention. For Sri Lanka to meet those requirements, it needs to re-engage with the UNHRC and address human rights abuses past and present. Sri Lanka is seeking its third IMF bail-out since the end of the war in 2009. Bail-out conditions set by the IMF in the past have focused on economic reform alone, and have not prevented Sri Lanka from sliding into yet another balance of payments crisis. To elevate the country out of the cyclical crisis it finds itself in, it is vital that the measures taken this time around are comprehensive and address some of the root causes of the issues that it faces.

As a key stakeholder at the IMF, the UK Government should propose conditions on any IMF financial assistance for Sri Lanka during the current economic crisis, including that Sri Lanka should carry out a strategic defence and security review to reduce its military spending, remove the military from engaging in commercial activities, meet the criteria for GSP+, and re-engage with the UNHRC process. I appreciate that the IMF does not have powers to impose such conditions on its own, but the UK, as penholder, can have significant influence in the discussions before any bail-out is agreed.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): One issue that we consistently raise, in addition to human rights abuses, is the level of corruption in Sri Lanka. One way we have been able to expose and tackle that corruption is through elements of the excellent media in Sri Lanka, but over the past 12 months—over a longer period too, but intensively over the past 12 months—we have seen harassment of journalists and the closure of the free media that exists. One condition that should be attached to any form of aid that goes into Sri Lanka—or any relationship that we have in the future—is that corruption is tackled as a result of a free media unharassed by Government.

**Elliot Colburn:** I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member's point about the importance of a free press. What he describes is having an effect beyond the borders of the island. A prominent Tamil news outlet, the *Tamil Guardian*, has been repeatedly engaged in battles with social media companies about its content. Because of the investigations that have been taking place, the Sri Lankan Government are actively trying to force action by social media companies worldwide. In the UK, the *Tamil Guardian* has had its content taken offline because of complaints from the Sri Lankan state. That cannot be right.

I am conscious that I have been speaking for quite a while, so I will bring my remarks to a close so that we can hear from other Back Benchers—

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) *rose*—

**Elliot Colburn:** First, though, I gladly give way.

**Ed Davey:** The hon. Gentleman is making a speech with which I totally agree. I just want to check something, because it is really helpful that we have all-party agreement on this. For all the reasons he set out, does he not agree that we need to review the generalised system of preferences that are given to Sri Lanka? It is not meeting the conditions that it is supposed to meet. It is time, I think, to withdraw those preferences.

**Elliot Colburn:** I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Indeed, we have set out in our motion—I am glad that it will pass unopposed—that that is what the UK Government should be doing.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister what engagement the FCDO has had with the IMF and the UNHRC on this matter. The human rights and economic situation in Sri Lanka is increasingly deteriorating. I hope that I have demonstrated succinctly why the UK needs to show international leadership on these issues, not just for our constituents who are still affected by the events that have taken place—and continue to take place—on the island, but to fulfil our international responsibility to a Commonwealth partner in dire need. I look forward to hearing Members' contributions to the debate.

3.3 pm

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank all those involved in securing the debate. I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the all-party group for Tamils.

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, not least to represent my constituents in Kingston and Surbiton from the Tamil community. They have been appalled, as we all have, by the devastating economic situation that has unfolded in Sri Lanka over the past year or so. As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said, that was a direct result of the economic mismanagement and corruption of the Sri Lankan Government. Their unfunded tax cuts and huge defence spending are all related to the appalling crisis that is hitting Sri Lankans from all communities.

However, I want to focus on the impact on the Tamil community. There are an estimated 5 million Tamils in Sri Lanka today, and they have endured the recent economic crisis after a whole series of what can only be described as acts of oppression—indeed, in many cases, genocide—from the civil war to the poor treatment they face now. With human rights abuses, abuse of the free press and abuse of the judiciary, the Sri Lankan state continues to target Tamils in some of the most unfair ways imaginable.

I am sure that other right hon. and hon. Members have constituents who have come from Sri Lanka who can testify personally to the abuses they have faced at the hands of the Sri Lankan police and military and security forces. Given that we know that from people who are now our own citizens and can bear witness to it in the way that the hon. Gentleman spoke about, this country has a duty. We have, more or less, a pretty good history of defending human rights around the world, and we must continue that by standing up for Sri Lankan Tamils.

I want in particular to focus on the generalised scheme of preferences in relation to trade. I am delighted that that point appears in the motion, and I really hope that the Minister will respond to it. It is an area that I have looked at in some detail. As a trade Minister between 2010 and 2012, I led a campaign at the EU to prevent Sri Lanka from being awarded what the EU calls GSP+ trade benefits. The evidence that I looked at showed overwhelmingly that Sri Lanka was in blatant breach of most of the conditions that it was supposed to have met to be given those benefits, in particular with regard to various human rights conventions. I am pleased to report that, back then, the UK was successful in stopping the Colombo Government getting those valuable rights.

Regrettably, in 2015 and 2016, the UK Government strongly supported the position of other EU member states and, together, they granted those trade benefits to Sri Lanka. It worried me at the time, looking in from outside—I was temporarily not in the House—that there was no debate about the fact that Sri Lanka was still clearly in breach of the framework of conditions around GSP+. That was not taken into account and was not highlighted in debate.

When I have engaged on this issue, not just in this country but at the EU, I have heard officials say that the argument for giving Sri Lanka those benefits is that it enables the EU and the UK to exercise some influence—that, due to the existence of the trade benefits, they can monitor whether the Sri Lankan Government are abiding by the conditions or making progress towards meeting them. I have never found that argument terribly convincing, but it is very convenient. People say, “We know they’re in breach, but they’re going to make some progress, so we’ll forget the conditions existed.” That is not good enough.

Let us give some credit and imagine that international monitors, from either the UK or the EU, were in Sri Lanka and engaging. Is there any evidence that that influence has resulted in any change in the Sri Lankan Government’s performance in respect of those conditions? I am afraid that, once again, the overwhelming evidence is that it has not. The Sri Lankan Government just continue as before; in fact, if anything, the situation has deteriorated. I am afraid that the argument that is sometimes made—“It’s okay, let’s have these conditions. We have a relationship; we can use that”—is just not working. We can only conclude that Sri Lanka has to be stripped of these trade benefits.

Some might argue that there is an economic crisis and it is the wrong time to do that. I am not against IMF support as long as it has real conditions, whether on human rights or with respect to the Sri Lankan Government agreeing to an independent mechanism of accountability for their actions, as we have all argued for—perhaps media rights could be included in the list of conditions, too—but I just think that, on GSP+, we have to send a real signal. Until they properly implement the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution, we cannot continue as we have been since 2015-16.

It might be argued that we should go further, and I think we should. The draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act that the Sri Lankan Government have implemented, and enforced primarily against Tamils and Muslim Sri Lankans, must be repealed. The Minister might not have heard this or been briefed on it, but I hear reports that the Sri Lankan Government are thinking of repealing the Act but of replacing it with a system based on the Chinese system of managing these issues. That would be a backward step as the Chinese influence in Colombo increases, and it would not help the Tamils whatever.

The Government must move beyond words; we need some real actions, such as those outlined in the motion. I have written to both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Trade Committee; it is time for a joint inquiry in this Parliament into the interaction between the UK’s foreign policy and our international trade. If we have learned anything from the last year, particularly from Sri Lanka but more broadly as well, it is that these two areas must be joined up given the challenging geopolitical situation now facing us.



We could helpfully debate many other countries in this regard, but that would be outwith the scope of the debate.

Specifically on Sri Lanka, we must consider the whole series of foreign policy tools. The Magnitsky sanctions regime must be applied, with their full force applying to people such as the Rajapaksa brothers; there is a lot of evidence in the international community from what remains of the free press in Sri Lanka of corruption and their having implemented shocking policies on the country, and that they were responsible for overseeing the heinous atrocities and war crimes, particularly in 2009. The case for acting is made stronger because some of our closest allies have already acted: the United States of America has not been as squeamish as the UK Government, and we do have to move.

For me, what the UK Government have done at the UNHRC is a case of the glass being half empty. Resolution 51/1 was welcome, but it was not tough enough. The Minister might say that in the negotiations in Geneva words had to change in order to bring more people on board to support it. The UK was the penholder, however, and can the Minister enlighten the House about the diplomatic arguments: why was the resolution so weak? In such debates in the chambers of the UN, we have to stand up for what we believe in, and a very strong case can be made on Sri Lanka: we can have tougher resolutions, and they need to be tougher.

I hope the UK Government will go further and will work through the UN for those stronger mechanisms. We should be promoting the case for Sri Lanka's Government to be taken to the International Criminal Court. I welcomed the new Prime Minister's commitment a week ago that his Government support the ICC; sometimes his predecessors seemed to wobble on that, so I was pleased he made that commitment. But we must move beyond words, and instead campaign to use the International Criminal Court proactively against war criminals such as the Rajapaksa brothers.

I look forward to hearing other Members' contributions. It is very good that we have come together to talk to our Government, and I hope the Government will hear that there is impatience in all quarters for stronger action given what is happening in Sri Lanka and what has happened for years now. We must flex our muscles on this.

3.14 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this debate and for his powerful opening speech, and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who also contributed effectively and powerfully to this debate. I thank, too, the Backbench Business Committee for making the debate possible.

I would like to declare an interest: I am vice-chair of the all-party group on Tamils. Members of the British Tamil community have supported me in many ways, including in assistance with fundraising and making it possible for me to visit the UN in Geneva to make the case for justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Many thousands of Tamils died in the closing months of the terrible civil war, and many are still unaccounted for. The descriptions we heard from my hon. Friend the

Member for Carshalton and Wallington were truly harrowing. No matter how often one is told about these appalling episodes of gender-based violence and other sorts of violence, it is still deeply disturbing to hear about them happening in the modern era in a Commonwealth country.

**Margaret Ferrier:** I am deeply concerned about the lack of progress on women's rights in Sri Lanka: girls can still be married from as young as 12 and women remain second-class citizens, which should not be the case in the modern world. Does the right hon. Lady agree that women need further support in Sri Lanka and this must be our focal point?

**Theresa Villiers:** I do agree. It is a development priority for the UK Government to support the empowerment of women and girls around the world. I hope that Ministers will raise these matters with their counterparts in Sri Lanka.

Families of the disappeared have been protesting for more than 2,000 days, demanding to know what happened to their missing loved ones. The establishment of the Office on Missing Persons looked like such a positive step forward—tangible progress following UNHRC resolutions—but the depressing reality is the OMP has not been able to trace a single person on its list of over 6,000 cases, nor has it clarified the fate of the disappeared in any meaningful way. Such was the conclusion of UN Human Rights commissioner Bachelet. She is also clear that the human rights situation in Sri Lanka is deteriorating. It is not just Tamils who suffer as a result; Muslims have also been targeted, as have Sinhala people who have joined some of the widespread protests about economic failure.

So let no one think that the great questions we are debating today here in the mother of Parliaments are only about legacy, important though they are. The oppressive security apparatus of the Sri Lankan state is still being used to exert control over the country's citizens. People are still arrested and detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, despite the promise made by the Sri Lankan Government in resolution 30/1 seven years ago to repeal it. The military remains entrenched in economic activities across the north and east; it retains control of swathes of land confiscated from Tamils, and senior military figures still hold prominent positions in Government, some of them appointed only in recent years. It is, frankly, astonishing that spending on the armed forces is greater today than at the height of the conflict, outstripping the combined total of the health and education budgets. This must have contributed to the debt crisis in Sri Lanka. In short, the Rajapaksa regime wrecked the economy and, as yet, there seems little visible progress under its successor. So, as Members have already acknowledged, there is a deep crisis in both economic and human rights terms.

In his response to the debate, I hope the Minister will commit the Government to the following actions: first, that they will push strongly in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva for the Sri Lankan Government to meet the obligations that they undertook in resolution 30/1, and which the Human Rights Council reiterated recently in resolution 51/1. The UK Government have a good record of being the penholder in that process and making a real difference, but they must keep up the pressure in the light of a deteriorating situation. Secondly, in the light

[Theresa Villiers]

of continued failure to bring war criminals to justice, progress must be made on an international mechanism to deliver accountability at last. This issue cannot wait any longer.

Thirdly, the Government must impose sanctions on those figures credibly implicated in war crimes and human rights abuses, as has been the case in countries such as the United States. Fourthly, they must find a way to ensure that any bailout from international institutions be accompanied by rigorous efforts to root out cronyism and corruption in Sri Lanka, and cut the irrationally large military spending budget. Finally, the UK Government must advocate for a new constitutional settlement in Sri Lanka that delivers power sharing and political equality, to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil people to have a real say in how they are governed.

Sri Lanka has a tragic past, as shown by the film “Continuing Cycles of Violence and Genocide in Sri Lanka”. The film was created by members of the British Tamil community and screened here in Parliament at an event I hosted for the British Tamils Forum in July. It is truly shocking to see the recurrent pattern of violence and injustice directed towards Tamils over many decades. However, there are grounds for hope. Recent protests saw people from diverse backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities coming together to demand change and a better future for all Sri Lankans. Let us all in this House and in this Government play our part in helping them reach that historic goal.

3.21 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank colleagues from the APPG for Tamils for securing this incredibly important debate. For 13 long years since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, the road to truth, justice and accountability has presented the Tamil community with so many challenges, so little progress and so much pain. No one who saw the images of the final days of the civil war could possibly forget them. The mass violation of human rights leaves a stain of injustice on Sri Lanka. The world looked away, but today we will not.

The ongoing crisis in Sri Lanka is having a devastating effect, with skyrocketing inflation and shortages of basic essentials such as food and medicine. Close to half the population now live below the poverty line. The UN warns that approximately one third of the population is experiencing food insecurity. This is a crisis in democracy decades in the making.

The world turned away when the Rajapaksa Government cluster-bombed their own people, committed genocide, murdered their journalists and enriched a small group led by one family. Their malign dynastic control stripped the economy bare, leaving behind a broken nation on the brink of economic collapse. The International Crisis Group points to Gotabaya’s authoritarian centralised and non-transparent decision making, describing the Administration as

“surrounded by cronies and oblivious to criticism”

and saying that they

“rejected repeated calls for a course correction as the crisis deepened.”

What should happen now? First, the country agreed a preliminary deal with the IMF in September for a loan of \$2.9 billion. An IMF bailout is essential, but

does the Minister agree that any financial assistance must go hand in hand with democratic and human rights reforms, in particular for the Tamil community?

Meanwhile, during the current crisis, the Sri Lankan Government have once more shown their brutal face, by aggressively cracking down, under draconian anti-terror legislation, on protesters such as Wasantha Mudalige, convener of the Inter University Students’ Federation, who was arrested at a peaceful protest in August. They agreed with the UN and the EU that they would either change or abolish the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Instead, they are using it in full force, creating unsafe conditions for all political activists, and defenders of human rights and democratic rights.

We should be extremely concerned by the findings of the UN high commissioner on the office on missing persons, which stated that it

“seems to be aimed at reducing the caseload and closing files rather than a comprehensive approach to establish the truth and ensure justice and redress to families.”

**John McDonnell:** There is a tragic irony that some of our constituents have gone out to Sri Lanka to look for the disappeared, and have been disappeared themselves. That is the failure of the whole system to have accountability and to investigate in an effective way.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. For years and years, families have searched for their loved ones. Women have sought their husbands, sons and brothers, and nothing happens. Irrespective of the international community and its demands, nothing happens. Every Tamil family knows someone who is missing. What steps have been taken to address that judgment?

In the most recent UN resolution, to which the UK was a penholder, why was there no recommendation to pursue criminal accountability by referral to the International Criminal Court? I could barely believe my eyes when reading the Government’s reasoning, which cited “insufficient...Security Council support.” Who are we to cast a veto for China or Russia before they have done so themselves? Our role on the international stage must be to send the loudest message that impunity will not be tolerated, not to pre-empt the inaction of other nations.

Finally, why has Britain failed to impose Magnitsky-style sanctions on any Sri Lankan official implicated in human rights abuses or corruption? The Opposition firmly believe that those who have been involved in such crimes should be brought to justice. I hope the Minister will see the strength of cross-party feeling on the issues raised today. I know that the Tamil community in my constituency will be listening carefully to the answers given. Let me finish by thanking them all for their contribution to Mitcham and Morden, and by saying loud and clear that, however long the road to reconciliation may still be, we will keep fighting for justice and human rights until they are achieved.

3.28 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): First, I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the APPG for Tamils, along with other Members who have already contributed to this excellent debate, which it is a privilege to be able

to take part in. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me and fellow vice-chairs of the APPG the opportunity to hold this important debate. That importance was highlighted by the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), in his powerful speech. It covered many of the points I want to make, but there are a few bits I would like to amplify.

It is a pleasure to represent my Tamil constituents in Parliament. My constituency of Richmond Park is home to a vibrant Tamil community. In the borough of Kingston alone, there are around 12,000 Tamils and Tamil is one of the most commonly spoken languages. It was an honour to attend Tamil Heritage Month celebrations in New Malden earlier this year. At those celebrations, a plaque was unveiled to commemorate Kingston being twinned with Jaffna, a historic city in the Tamil homeland of northern Sri Lanka. The plaque now serves as an important physical reminder of the close cultural ties between our two cities.

While we celebrate the contribution of the Tamil population to the UK, it is vital that we remember and acknowledge the hardship that the community has experienced and continues to experience in Sri Lanka. I share the concern expressed by my constituents and fellow Members of this House about the devastating economic and political crisis that has unfolded in Sri Lanka. The economic crisis was self-inflicted. Ordinary people have been left to suffer the consequences of the Sri Lankan Government's economic mismanagement, resulting in runaway inflation, power blackouts and fuel rationing.

For the Tamil community, this period has also been marked by ongoing oppression and violation of their human rights. The homeland of the minority Tamil population in north-east Sri Lanka has seen a dramatic increase in military presence. According to the British Tamils Forum, there is now one soldier for every six civilians in the region. That is an intimidatingly high concentration of military personnel. Defence spending has also soared way above and beyond previous levels, contributing towards the economic crisis. Months of mass protests erupted this year over lack of food and worsening humanitarian and economic conditions. The Sri Lankan people have spoken out and demanded change.

As a country with close historical links to Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom has a critical role to play in ensuring the humanitarian impact of this crisis is mitigated. I therefore join hon. Members in calling on the Government to use their international standing and position within the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the IMF to support peaceful political reform in Sri Lanka. It is vital that any such representations are communicated to parliamentarians. Can the Minister therefore provide an update on the conversations the UK Foreign Office has held with international partners to discuss their response to the economic and political situation in Sri Lanka?

I also join my colleagues from the APPG for Tamils in urging the UK Government to use their role as a key stakeholder of the IMF to call for conditionalities to be imposed on any financial assistance provided to Sri Lanka. As stated in our motion, such conditionalities should support demilitarisation by requiring that Sri Lanka

“carries out a Strategic Defence and Security Review to reduce its military spending”.

We cannot stand by and allow IMF assistance to line the coffers of corrupt politicians.

The UK's commitment to a peaceful and democratic settlement in Sri Lanka must be shown right from the top level of Government. The Prime Minister was photographed meeting Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe at COP27 just a few days ago. In the light of the continued oppression of the Tamil population at the hands of the current Administration, it is vital that the Prime Minister uses such opportunities to make constructive representations. There has been no official readout published of this meeting. Can the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister raised concerns for the Tamil population with the Sri Lankan President? It would be hugely disappointing if he did not, and raise further questions around the Prime Minister's judgment.

Since the end of the civil war, over 100,000 Tamils remain unaccounted for and presumed dead. Thirteen years later, many of those responsible for atrocious crimes against the Tamil population have borne no responsibility for their actions. It is clear that domestic mechanisms for accountability in Sri Lanka have eroded and failed over the past few years. The Sri Lankan Government seem set only to continue along the same path of denial and delay. The UK Government must not turn a blind eye to the injustices of the past. We are calling on the Government to take the vital step of finally recognising the crimes committed against the Tamil population as a genocide. Only once that has been achieved will the UK be truly honouring our human rights commitments.

3.33 pm

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate hon. and right hon. Members on securing this important debate, which gives me the opportunity to speak about the human rights and economic situation in Sri Lanka—a situation of great concern to a number of my constituents in Ealing North. Like many of my constituents, I have been deeply concerned by the ongoing violence and the suppression of peaceful protesters in Sri Lanka as the economic crisis on the island continues to unfold.

Just over the weekend, we saw peaceful protesters face violence at the hands of Sri Lankan police officers as they demonstrated against the detention of two student leaders. That is just one of the latest examples of the arbitrary detention of minority groups such as Tamils and Muslims, which has now expanded to include the Sinhala population, as state security forces have clamped down on the mass protests that have taken place in Colombo over recent months. I have also heard disturbing reports that the Sri Lankan army, which continues to maintain a military presence in the north-east of the country, has been disrupting the Tamil community as they prepare to commemorate victims of armed conflict.

Over the last week, Tamils in the north-east have begun preparations for Maaveerar Naal—Great Heroes' Day—which falls on 27 November. I have been concerned to hear that the preparations have been disrupted by plain-clothes officers in what appears to be an attempt to intimidate Tamils organising any memorial activities.

As the current economic and political crises have gripped Sri Lanka, I have been contacted by many constituents with deep concerns about the conduct of the former Rajapaksa Government. I have written to the Minister for south Asia, Lord Ahmad, on multiple



[James Murray]

occasions and pressed him on what the UK Government are doing to support Sri Lanka with the economic situation and to help bring an end to the violence that has erupted. The current economic crisis has left close to half the population living below the poverty line, while a third face food insecurity. The people of Sri Lanka need the UK to do all it can to help bring an end to that.

Alongside help with the immediate economic and political situation, many of my constituents, particularly those from the Tamil community, have made clear the importance of their continued fight for accountability and justice for what happened during the Sri Lankan civil war. As we have heard from hon. Members, the UNHRC has passed resolutions on the matter and the UK has been the penholder. The most recent resolution, passed last month, renewed the mandate of the Office for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to report on Sri Lanka and to protect and preserve evidence of past human rights abuses to use in future accountability processes. However, Sri Lanka is not complying with the resolutions, so the UK must introduce targeted sanctions on individuals who are credibly accused of war crimes.

Earlier this year, I met a group of Tamil constituents to discuss General Shavendra Silva, a member of the Sri Lankan army who was sanctioned by the US Government due to allegations of human rights violations during the Sri Lankan civil war. Silva was the head of Sri Lanka's notorious 58 Division: an army unit that committed grave violations of international law and oversaw a military offensive that killed tens of thousands of Tamils. I urge the Minister to commit the Government to sanctioning General Silva under the terms of the British Government's global human rights sanctions regime.

The people of Sri Lanka face a desperate economic situation while peaceful protesters face violent suppression. That comes after so many years during which people in the country and beyond, particularly from the Tamil community, have been fighting for accountability for what happened during the civil war. As an MP representing so many constituents with strong ties to Sri Lanka, I repeat my calls for the Government to give whatever support they can to bring an end to the immediate economic crisis and violence and to support the ongoing fight for justice.

3.36 pm

**Claudia Webbe** (Leicester East) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing the debate, together with the vice-chairs of the APPG, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The significant Tamil and Sri Lankan communities of Leicester East are watching the debate with interest. Many have experienced the atrocities at first hand. They are deeply troubled by the appalling human rights abuses and worsening economic situation in Sri Lanka.

It is worth repeating that Sri Lanka is experiencing its worst economic crisis in a lifetime, with food inflation running at over 90% and a large majority of people receiving reduced incomes. There is significant hunger,

with 8.7 million people inadequately fed, including millions of children. Access to healthcare is severely limited, with even basic drugs in desperately short supply.

**John McDonnell:** It is important in this debate to try to get across an understanding of Sri Lanka's economy. It has natural resources on a scale any other country would wish for and dream of, including natural mineral resources, and agriculture resources. The problem is that a political and military complex now controls the economy for its own interests. As a result, we have extremes of wealth and poverty through not just mismanagement but calculated management by the military who dominate the economy.

**Claudia Webbe:** The right hon. Member is absolutely right. I thank him for reminding us of that situation; it is absolutely clear.

Sri Lanka has defaulted on \$55 billion-worth of debt and declared bankruptcy, causing widespread misery for its citizens. It does not even have enough foreign exchange reserves to buy essentials for its citizens. After months of delay, the International Monetary Fund has reached a staff-level agreement on an extended fund facility arrangement, but behind closed doors—no one actually knows what has been agreed.

The Sri Lankan people are experiencing the deepest austerity in a country that is already on its knees, with its people starving and dying from lack of food, medicines and fuel, despite the natural resources and wealth of the country. Protesters took to the streets to demand their voices be heard in three popular uprisings to end the Rajapaksa dynasty and to demand a new democracy when the new president was sworn in this year. The state responded brutally, despite the protests being non-violent and peaceful. Remarkably, it has brought demonstrators from different communities together, with protests spreading out, rather than being focused on Colombo alone.

However, there is an enormous wave of state repression taking place in Sri Lanka at present. The entrenchment of all Executive power in the presidency has caused the politicisation of all arms of the state, leading to corruption, mismanagement, impunity and the brutal denial of human rights. The new president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, launched a brutal attack on the protesters and started a new wave of repression.

Human rights organisations, including the UNHRC, have said that the Executive presidency, which has entrenched an exceedingly authoritarian rule, must end the use of terror laws against protesters. The draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act 1978 was used on Tamils for over 30 years, and on Muslims after the Easter Sunday suicide bomb attacks, on a massive and barbaric scale. The state has again begun to use its atrocities against peaceful protesters. Despite criticism from the Sri Lankan Supreme Court, the Sri Lankan Government have also recently planned to introduce a Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill, which will essentially see the building of mass internment camps where protesters fighting for democracy would be sent to rot.

We must never forget the large-scale corruption of the Rajapaksa regime, including the stealing of funds from the bilateral private credit lines the country procured. As we know, information has come to light that there could be \$10 billion of foreign reserves hiding in overseas accounts, including in tax havens in UK territories such

as the Cayman Islands. Along with other nations in the global south that suffer at the hands of a global economy that favours the global north, we must call on multilateral institutions to cancel debt collection at this critical time, as we did for Ukraine.

The UK Government must take a stand against the current repression and mass arrests of peaceful protesters. We must push the Sri Lankan Government to end the use of terror laws on protesters and stop the cruel Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill from passing, and assist the country in relation to repatriation funds that could be easily hiding in the UK and in our overseas territories. It is worth noting that Amnesty International's recent report on the crisis points out the importance of the opportunity to offer a debt amnesty to Sri Lanka and a package of international aid tied to action from the Government to resolve their human rights issues, bring justice for war crimes and abuses, and implement a universal approach to social protections. Any response from the UK to the crisis that does not involve a cast-iron commitment to take a role in those solutions will inevitably be inadequate. It is vital that the Government put Amnesty International's proposed solutions at the heart of their actions.

3.44 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing it and for setting the scene so well. It is never easy to listen when some of the atrocities are explicitly described. I always find it difficult to respond because they annoy me and I think they annoy us all. It is disturbing to think of the brutality of man upon woman, man upon man or man upon children.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. Chairing that group has given me a deep insight into the issue of persecution, the abuse of the right to freedom of religion or belief and its impact on wider society, including on the economic situation of a country. I was pleased to hear some of the fantastic speeches from right hon. and hon. Members. Their depth of knowledge of the subject matter and of Sri Lanka has added to the debate. We look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing what we in this country can do to help the Sri Lankans who been abused so terribly over the last period of time.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) referred to the amount of money that was spent on military equipment. That caught my attention because two or three weeks ago, a story in the national press stated that the Sri Lankan Government had spent a vast amount of money on military equipment that they could not even afford to pay for. It makes me wonder why any country or company would sell if Sri Lanka does not have the ability to pay, but that underlines the issue. She also said that the situation is reinforced by a suppressive security policy from the Sri Lankan Government—a corrupt, violent, brutal Government who must be held accountable for their deadly crimes. Whether we are talking about their officers, their soldiers or whoever it may be, they need to be made accountable, as others have said.

I will focus on persecution. Three years ago, Sri Lanka ranked 30th on the Open Doors world watch list—a list of the top 50 countries where Christians are persecuted

for their faith. This year, it dropped off the list, not because the situation is getting better for Christians or other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, but because the persecution of religious or belief minorities is getting worse around the world. Sri Lanka is still carrying out despicable crimes, and there are still human rights issues and the persecution of religious groups. That has not stopped and I will illustrate that by describing some of the things that have happened in Sri Lanka.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful contribution. He spoke, importantly, about what we can do as Members and about what the Government can do. Does he agree that cutting international aid is possibly one of the worst things that we can do? In fact, we need an increase, and, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said, properly implementing the Magnitsky sanctions, which the Government have roundly failed to do, is also incredibly important.

**Jim Shannon:** Yes, I agree. Hopefully, when the Minister responds, he will give us some encouragement on the hon. Lady's request, which others have made, in relation to foreign aid and the Magnitsky sanctions.

It is critical, in the current climate of escalating human rights abuses in places such as Afghanistan, China and Russia, that we do not ignore the plight of Christians and other religious, belief or ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a diverse country where there are complex divisions between ethnic and religious communities. Freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed by the constitution, but despite that protection, the abuse of that fundamental right is widespread and has only increased in recent years. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and other religious minorities suffer abusive Government regulations that disproportionately affect their communities, and they endure discrimination that is unnoticed and ignored by authorities, with perpetrators escaping with impunity. The law of the land, and the Government of the land, let that happen. Tensions remain unresolved in the wake of the civil war, and recent terror attacks and the covid-19 pandemic have worsened the situation. I recall that not so many years ago Sri Lanka was a holiday destination where people wanted to go, but after everything that has been happening, that is no longer the case.

In the past couple of months, the changes to sections 291A and 291B of the penal code, alongside the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act and the misuse of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, have been used to target members of religious minorities. I ask the Minister what discussions have taken place with the Sri Lankan Government to ensure that those laws are not used to the detriment of religious minority communities, which is what is happening. If they are being used abusively, vindictively and maliciously, we need to do something to change that.

Last month, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that the Sri Lankan authorities were using these laws to unfairly target minorities and critics of the Government. The former UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has noted that, far from protecting religious communities, blasphemy allegations have

“ironically become a repressive tool used for curtailing freedom of thought or opinion, conscience, and religion or belief.”

[Jim Shannon]

It is always worrying whenever legislation is used in an oppressive, vindictive, violent and malicious way, which is quite clearly what is happening. False allegations of blasphemy or terrorism have resulted in sentences of 20 years for those who criticise the Government.

Freedom of religion or belief is important not just because it protects the rights of the most vulnerable in society, but because it is a right that fosters respect among others, reduces corruption, encourages broader freedoms, develops the economy and multiplies international trust in a country. It is clear to me as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief that we must speak up for those with a Christian belief, for those with another belief and for those with no belief. That is what I believe in my heart, because I believe that our God is a God of love. I seek parity and equality for all those who express a religion or belief.

According to the Pew Research Centre, eight of the 10 most corrupt countries have high or very high governmental restrictions on religious liberties. Religious freedom contributes to better economic and business outcomes. Advances in religious freedom are in the self-interest of businesses, Governments and societies. The fact that the Sri Lankan Government take such a lax view of human rights and religious liberties is incredibly worrying.

When we look at the economic situation in Sri Lanka and its trade with the UK, it is vital that we focus on human rights. At Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions yesterday, I asked the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), whether she and the Government will uphold human rights and religious freedoms in their deals with Sri Lanka. She replied in a very positive fashion, which I hope might be a taste of a future in which human rights, justice and accountability are key to everything we do on trade. I encourage the Government to build on the Minister's answer yesterday and ensure that progress includes the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief for all.

I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington again for securing the debate, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed in a very positive way. It is unfortunately not a debate that has much heart-warming content, but this place gives us a chance to be a voice for the voiceless and speak up for those who have nobody to speak for them.

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

3.53 pm

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank all those who have spoken so far in what is an important and timely debate, given the ongoing situation in Sri Lanka. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his impassioned, detailed and well-evidenced speech.

While Governments and politicians bear responsibility for most of the woes affecting the country, it is ordinary Sri Lankan citizens who are suffering because of policies outwith their control. The economic crisis has resulted in severe shortages of imported goods and rampant

inflation, pushing millions of people into poverty. Sri Lanka has the fifth largest food price inflation in the world: the year-on-year rate is nearly 94%, and rice costs 150% more than it did at this time last year. That is having a devastating impact on the population, with over 30% of the country—6.3 million people, which is more than the entire population of Scotland—regarded as food-insecure and requiring humanitarian assistance, according to the World Food Programme. As a consequence, one in five children under the age of five is stunted, and one in six is suffering from wasting. It is truly hard to believe.

The economic crisis is therefore a humanitarian crisis. The global north—of which the UK is, of course, a part—must ensure that it is not exacerbated, and must ensure that Sri Lankans are not punished for policies and circumstances over which they have no power. In the immediate term, the foremost priority must be the provision of humanitarian assistance. It is therefore right that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has pledged a humanitarian aid package to Sri Lanka through its commitment of £3 million to be delivered through the Red Cross and UN partners. While we in the Scottish National party welcome any increased aid commitments, owing to the acute crisis in the country, current levels of financial support will barely touch the sides.

Given that the UK spent significantly more in Sri Lanka in the past and that the situation has worsened, with the country now facing its worst economic crisis since it gained its independence in 1948, there must be a drastic increase in bilateral and multilateral aid commitments. Furthermore, the UK Government must pledge to include and consult local and grassroots non-governmental organisations in all bilateral talks on UK official development assistance to Sri Lanka to ensure that aid can be spent most effectively for the greatest gain for local people.

All this will, of course, only be possible if the UK Government categorically rule out any possibility of a further cut in the aid budget, and reinstate the proportion of 0.7% of gross national income. Next week's Budget needs to provide for that restoration, because too many lives have been lost already.

We in the SNP believe that more radical support is required to allow the Sri Lankan economy to reform without crippling fiscal pressure, rather than debt restructuring or debt relief. We call for Sri Lanka's debt to be cancelled, so that funds can be put into local communities rather than being transferred directly to repay debts to the global north. While economic mismanagement by successive Governments has weakened Sri Lanka's public finances, external forces which have exacerbated the crisis cannot be ignored.

Sri Lanka's tourism sector was deeply affected by the 2019 Easter bombings—many Members may have seen the results on their television screens, or may have visited the area since then—and had never fully recovered before the covid-19 pandemic brought the industry to a complete standstill. In its January report "Covid-19 in developing countries: secondary impacts", the International Development Committee, of which I am a member, observed that

"To mitigate the looming economic crisis in highly indebted developing countries, the Government advocated for debt relief at a multilateral level."



The Committee added that

“the Government should consider options for the cancellation of debt and provide this Committee with the rationale behind its decisions on debt relief versus debt cancellation for low- and middle-income countries.”

I must point out to the Minister that we are still awaiting a reply to those comments. Given the impact of Covid-19 and the deterioration in the situation since the pandemic, Sri Lanka is precisely the kind of country which could be considered for debt cancellation rather than debt relief measures.

Given that Sri Lanka sources 45% of its wheat imports and over 50% of its sunflower oil, seeds, copper, steel, iron, and potassium chloride from Russia and Ukraine, and given that those countries are two key markets for Sri Lankan black tea exports, Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine helped to bring the country's economy to breaking point. In the light of Sri Lanka's socioeconomic crisis, the state's funds should not be sent to the likes of Washington DC to repay international debt, but should be used to rebuild the country and urgently invest in vital services for struggling Sri Lankans.

Of course, the economic and humanitarian crisis cannot be addressed in isolation. Protecting human rights and adequately addressing and reconciling Sri Lanka's past are also critical to supporting long-term stability in the country. Indeed, Human Rights Watch has stated:

“Sri Lanka's foreign partners, who are working to address the economic crisis, need to remember that steps towards lasting stability won't succeed without protecting rights and addressing past abuses.”

The 26-year-long civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan Government was marked by countless atrocities, many of which we have heard about today, and it has been suggested that it was genocide. I share those views, as does my party.

I have visited Sri Lanka several times in the last 12 years, first in 2010 shortly after the war, when I made a point as an individual of going up to Jaffna to listen to the brave voices talk about their recent experiences of the war. I went back in 2016 with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, precisely to discuss peace and reconciliation as a result of the war. I want to pay tribute to all those voices that, in fear and trepidation, came to tell me about their experiences, about the tens of thousands who have disappeared or worse—we do not know where they are—and about the total inactivity by the Government, both post-2010 and post-2016, to try to redress the balance.

As we know, many of the people in political power in Sri Lanka today held senior positions in 2009 when the war ended. Former President Rajapaksa was the defence chief during the war and stands accused of serious human rights violations during and after the civil war. In July when he was ousted from the presidency, he fled the protests in a military plane, having granted himself executive powers to do so, but he is now back in the country. He has never faced accountability for those human rights violations. While he was President, he pardoned and released former army Staff Sergeant Sunil Ratnayake, who was convicted in 2015 for the murder of eight civilians, including children, in Jaffna in 2000.

Without comprehensive transparency, accountability and reconciliation for crimes committed in Sri Lanka over these years, the country will never be able to fully heal from the trauma and legacy of the civil war. In 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded that domestic efforts to ensure justice for victims of the Sri Lankan civil war had failed completely:

“Despite commitments made in 2015, the current government, like its predecessor, has failed to pursue genuine truth-seeking or accountability processes... The impacts on thousands of survivors, from all communities, is devastating. Moreover, the systems, structures, policies and personnel that gave rise to such grave violations in the past remain—and have recently been reinforced.”

Those are the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The UK has had a role to play in taking steps towards conflict resolution projects in Sri Lanka, primarily through the conflict, stability and security fund, which has built anti-bribery and anti-corruption capacity in the civil service and judiciary, strengthened community policing and the police response to gender and human rights issues and cleared high-density minefields. But I must repeat for the umpteenth time in this Chamber that this is being jeopardised by wider aid cuts, which must be reversed urgently if the UK Government are serious about peace building and reconciliation projects in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, as an ally of Sri Lanka, the UK Government need to do more to ensure accountability for the heinous acts committed during the civil war. The UK Government must encourage their Sri Lankan counterparts to establish a hybrid war crimes court with the participation of international judges and prosecutors, or for those war crimes to be investigated by an international criminal tribunal if that is not possible. The UK Government must also acknowledge that it cannot be “business as usual” in our bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. That is an affront to our own democracy, let alone to those who are suffering in Sri Lanka. The Government must also re-stress the importance of political accountability, transparency and the rule of law with their Sri Lankan counterparts.

As we know, human rights abuses are continuing today and the UK Government must be prepared to impose Magnitsky sanctions on Government and military officials who continue to violently clamp down on Sri Lankan protesters, as well as on individuals such as the chief of defence staff, Shavendra Silva, who is accused of deliberately shelling hospitals and civilians, involvement in sexual violence, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances during the civil war, and who has already been sanctioned by the US. Given that Sri Lanka is scarred by a history of ethnonationalist conflict, any new political disorder can exacerbate historical tensions and spark further outbreaks of violence. Proactive prevention of this must be a priority. It is not enough for the international community simply to condemn acts of ethnoreligious discrimination and violence. These condemnations must be backed up with a clear, strong diplomatic agenda and with comprehensive monitoring mechanisms.

The SNP has long called for an atrocity prevention strategy. In the FCDO's international development strategy, published in May 2022, the UK Government made a vague commitment to

“establish a new conflict and atrocity prevention hub”.

[Chris Law]

Any such strategy must include atrocity reporting and monitoring mechanisms in UK embassies around the world, and it must focus on prevention-first policy thinking rather than on purely punitive measures following an atrocity. The UK Government must present their plans for scrutiny, and they must pledge to expand their atrocity prevention work in countries such as Sri Lanka. The UK's response to the human rights and economic situation must ensure that power is placed back in the hands of the Sri Lankan people so that they may exercise full economic and political accountability over their leaders.

The legacy of the past and the continuing violations must be addressed by the Sri Lankan Government, the UK and other international actors. However, this cannot stop us providing the urgent relief that is required now. Let us have fewer words and more action, and let us hear it from the Minister.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister, Catherine West.

4.6 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am aware that there is one more debate to fit in before the Adjournment, so I will be relatively brief. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) covered a lot of ground, as have the other excellent speakers.

I congratulate the Members who secured this very good debate. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) made a comprehensive introductory speech. I emphasise the long-standing campaigning role of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on this issue. She has always been a champion for her Tamil constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) talked about increased militarisation and the disproportionate public spending on arms, with less money being spent on food and basics, which is clearly what the Sri Lankan people need right now. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) reminded the House of the worrying levels of corruption throughout the Rajapaksa years, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) talked about the arbitrary detention of civilians during the disruptive events of the last few months.

It is not long since we had a very good urgent question on this subject, but I would like some updates from the Minister. Most importantly, I reiterate our friendship with the Sri Lankan people and our commitment to the basics so that they can keep going in a very tough economic climate for them. The UK has played its role in developing a good package with the IMF—£2.9 billion is the figure in the Library briefing paper—but, as well as the economic picture, we have concerns about the human rights abuses during the 2009 civil war.

We have often had Tamil delegations at our constituency events. In Hornsey and Wood Green, Tamils have come to see me because they are worried about disappeared relatives and about the tragic events that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington so intimately described.

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): On those tragic events, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) mentioned the case of Shavendra Silva. Does my hon. Friend agree that our Government should be using the powers they now have to sanction people overseas? Shavendra Silva has been sanctioned by the US. Should we not be doing the same?

**Catherine West:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point, and I would like to hear the Minister's assessment now that the UK has left the EU and has more flexibility on sanctions. Could this individual be the subject of powerful Magnitsky-style sanctions?

May I also ask the Minister what recent engagement he or colleagues within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have had with the Government of Sri Lanka, including on the economic situation, so that the crisis can be concluded and Sri Lanka can get back to being a tourist destination? It relies on that so heavily for its economy. Have the British Government proposed conditionality on the International Monetary Fund funding, so that we can reflect back what this House's concerns are within that discussion about finance? What steps have the Government taken to support measures to bring to justice those accused of human rights abuses?

We have had an excellent airing of the debate this afternoon—in the past six months, we have also had urgent questions on Sri Lanka—and we await the Minister's assessment on those key points. May I press him to convene with the Minister in the other House, Lord Ahmad, whom I understand is intimately aware of all these issues, to press the points about the economy? It is mentioned in the motion and I note the Government are accepting the motion as it stands. Will the Minister also press the point about the important human rights issues, which Tamil constituents have brought to our surgeries and on which we want to hear answers? Will he put anything else in the way of detail in the House of Commons Library, so that we can send it on to our constituents and they can be assured that we have had a full debate about the human rights picture and the desperate economic situation facing the people of Sri Lanka?

4.11 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** I am pleased to respond to this debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for leading it. I also thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for securing it. We have heard a number of moving contributions, reflecting the deep humanitarian and economic crisis afflicting Sri Lanka, and I am grateful for those contributions. We heard from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), the hon. Members for Richmond Park, for Ealing North (James Murray), for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the Opposition spokespersons, the hon. Members for Dundee West (Chris Law) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). I should say that the Minister of State,

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) is now the lead Minister on our relations with Sri Lanka, but I am pleased to respond to this debate on her behalf, and I will briefly reflect on the activities of Lord Ahmad, who, until now, has held that brief.

The UK and Sri Lanka have had a long shared history. Many UK citizens and parliamentarians have close ties with that country; we have heard Members speak movingly of their experiences in Sri Lanka. The relationship really does matter to the UK, and it has been extremely difficult for us all to witness Sri Lanka's recent economic decline. It is an economic crisis made worse by dreadful and long-term mismanagement, the economic fallout from the terrible 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the covid pandemic and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

As for what the British Government is doing about this, we believe that a stable and inclusive political settlement is an essential foundation for economic recovery and growth in the long term in Sri Lanka. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon made that point to Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe in July and to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Gunawardena in August, urging progress both on human rights and accountability, and on economic reform.

The UK is providing economic support through a number of institutions, including the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank and the Paris Club. As has been mentioned, we welcome the initial September staff-level agreement with the IMF for a four-year support programme of some \$3 billion. Although this agreement represents a positive milestone for Sri Lanka, continued negotiations are needed to achieve final programme approval and a route to restore macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability.

Some hon. Members have proposed conditionalities on IMF assistance. Within its governance structure, the IMF only has the ability to impose conditionality linked to economic policy, not political or human rights-linked conditionality. But of course we want human rights progress to advance in tandem with economic progress, and we will use other mechanisms to hold the Sri Lankans to account and progress human rights in that regard.

**Theresa Villiers:** May I emphasise that, if these international bodies are allowed to impose conditions in relation to economic matters, they should be imposing conditions in relation to military spending, cronyism and corruption? Those are reasonable asks of any bail-out.

**Leo Docherty:** I note my right hon. Friend's comments, but we seek to interlink conditionality with our approach in multilateral forums with regard to human rights. Essentially, we are using the UN to push forward human rights.

In addition to our economic support through institutions, the UK Government have also provided humanitarian assistance. We announced £3 million of humanitarian support in September. This will be delivered through the Red Cross and the United Nations partners as part of our ongoing humanitarian response. It is, of course, important that humanitarian assistance reaches those who need it most, wherever they are in the country, and that is something that we want to see. The UK is also the largest donor to the United Nations central emergency

response fund, contributing more than £1.7 billion since its inception in 2006. The fund has already provided \$5 million to Sri Lanka.

I wish to address the question raised by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) about conditionality with regard to trade discussions. On the generalised scheme of trade preferences, the EU scheme to which he referred will be replaced by our new developing countries trading scheme early next year. Under this new scheme of preferences, the UK will retain the power to suspend a country on the grounds of human rights violations. I take his point and am pleased to confirm that, under our new arrangements, we will have that capacity in the future.

**Ed Davey:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I am not sure whether he has read the House, on both sides, or the motion today. It is a question not of whether the Government have the capacity to do something but of whether they are going to use that capacity to send the message that this House wants to send. We are not prepared to put up any longer with the way the Sri Lankan Government are treating many of their citizens, not least those from the Tamil community.

**Leo Docherty:** I note the right hon. Gentleman's intervention and am grateful for it. I hope that I have offered him reassurance by noting that we do have that capacity. I will not make pronouncements from the Dispatch Box today about our plans, but it is reassuring to Members to know that we maintain that freedom of movement in terms of our future trading relationship with Sri Lanka.

Let me turn explicitly to the human rights situation. The comprehensive report issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which has been mentioned today, highlighted a number of profound concerns. There continues to be a lack of progress on basic human rights and post-conflict accountability. The report also highlights economic crimes and the link to a lack of accountability, and the need to ensure that the most vulnerable continue to receive support. Minority communities continue to face discrimination and harassment by state authorities. In the north and the east of the country, where Tamils and Muslims are in the majority, schemes that emphasise Buddhist hegemony continue to aggravate tensions. For two years, provincial council elections have been delayed under the promise of electoral reform, denying a voice for local and minority groups.

Protest leaders have been arbitrarily or unlawfully arrested and the state of emergency powers have been extensively used. The Government of Sri Lanka have made numerous commitments to the international community to address this situation. They have promised to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1978 and implement legislation that is compliant with international human rights standards. The Government have also promised to implement a proper accountability mechanism to establish truth, reconciliation and justice. We will continue to call on Sri Lanka to make progress on human rights and accountability. We will continue to work with international partners to hold the Government of Sri Lanka to their promises. We have supported efforts to promote human rights and peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka for many years.



[Leo Docherty]

In October, we worked with partners in the UN to agree the new resolution on Sri Lanka—resolution 51/L1—which has been mentioned many times today, to extend the mandate to report on the realities on the ground and to preserve and protect evidence of past human rights violations and abuses for future accountability processes.

This international framework ensures that Sri Lanka remains on the international human rights agenda, and we believe that this diplomatic approach is the best way to encourage progress. However, we recognise that sincere and sustainable progress on human rights and accountability must be led by the people of Sri Lanka. Over the past three years we have spent more than £10 million from our conflict, stability and security fund to support peacebuilding, social cohesion and gender equality, as well as to strengthen democratic institutions. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon met Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry in September to urge progress and to renew our offer to work with Sri Lanka.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned sanctions. The Government would not speculate from the Dispatch Box on possible designations, since that would reduce their impact, but we keep all evidence and potential listings under close review.

To conclude, the people of Sri Lanka are experiencing an unprecedented economic crisis and they continue to face violations of human rights and barriers to justice. In response to the economic situation, the UK Government have provided direct humanitarian assistance and financial support through multilateral institutions, and we continue to pursue options for debt relief through all of this; ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable continue to receive support at this time is critical.

We will continue to support the Sri Lankan people in their pursuit of justice and accountability and of progress on human rights, including at the UN Human Rights Council. Sri Lanka is an important and valued friend of the United Kingdom, and this Government will do all we can to help the Sri Lankan people to achieve the prosperous and peaceful future they deserve.

4.20 pm

**Elliot Colburn:** I am aware there is an important debate to follow, so I will be very brief. I again thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the chance to discuss this subject today, and I thank all colleagues who co-sponsored the debate or spoke in it. I urge the Government to revisit their strategies for promoting human rights on the island of Sri Lanka. Many Tamils will feel that we have been here before, and we really need to see bilateral action by the UK to secure the action, the peace, the accountability and the justice that Tamils have been waiting for.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House is concerned by reports of increased militarisation and human rights violations in Sri Lanka, particularly during the country's current economic crisis; calls upon the Government, as a key stakeholder of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to propose conditionalities on any IMF financial assistance for

Sri Lanka during the current economic crisis, including that Sri Lanka carries out a Strategic Defence and Security Review to reduce its military spending and remove the military from engaging in commercial activities, that Sri Lanka meets the criteria required for Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus, and that Sri Lanka re-engages with the United Nations Human Rights Council process and fully implements resolution 30/1; and calls upon the Government to implement targeted sanctions against individuals who are credibly accused of committing war crimes during the Sri Lankan Civil War.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Hon. Members may wish to remain in the Chamber, because I will now announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Treasury Committee—[*Interruption.*] Order. I do not expect to be heckled when I am making an announcement.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am just bringing some drama.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Some 397 votes were cast, none of which were invalid. The counting went to four rounds. There were 375 active votes in the final round, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 188 votes and the person elected Chair, with 204 votes, is Harriett Baldwin. She will take up her post immediately, and I congratulate her on her election. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, I put on record my thanks to all the Clerks who organised today's ballot and pay tribute to the wonderful campaign that my esteemed colleagues ran for this Committee chairmanship. I have genuinely enjoyed the campaign and getting to know their priorities better, and I thank them so much for the campaign's having been held in such a polite and friendly fashion. I also pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), who has chaired the Committee so ably over the past three years; it has been a pleasure to serve under his chairmanship and I feel truly honoured to be following in his footsteps. Lastly, I thank everyone who voted in today's election, whether they voted for me or not. On our Committee we seek to serve Members, and we look forward to hearing from all colleagues on the issues that matter to them the most.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I reiterate the congratulations of the House to the hon. Lady.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Further to that point of order, briefly I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) on winning. I confirm what she says; it was a good-natured, courteous and civilised campaign. I thank everyone who has voted and in particular the Clerks who organised it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Thank you.

## Levelling Up Rural Britain

*[Relevant documents: Letter from the Chair to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities regarding the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, dated 24 August 2022, HC 309; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 28 February 2022, on the Levelling Up White Paper, HC 1158.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the hon. Member for North Devon to move the motion, it is obvious that a great many people are seeking to catch my eye and that we have a limited amount of time this afternoon. I expect there to be a time limit in the region of six minutes for Back-Bench speeches. I hope that will allow people to prepare accordingly.

4.25 pm

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of levelling up rural Britain.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I am delighted to see one of the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities team here today, as in my mind far too much of levelling up rural Britain is seen to be the home of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, yet the economic challenges of rural communities are immense, and the increase in the cost of living disproportionately impacts these communities, with their reliance on private cars for transport, longer journeys and older, poorly insulated housing stock, often in exposed and windy locations. I am going to call on my own experience in Devon to illustrate my words today, but I recognise that these issues are replicated around the country.

Much of rural Britain also has productivity issues. The excellent “Levelling up the rural economy”, produced in conjunction with the Country Land and Business Association, goes into great detail on these issues, many of which relate to connectivity. I took the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for broadband and digital communication there when I arrived in Westminster, because getting broadband done was second only to getting Brexit done for my rural North Devon constituency. It is hard for a community to be as productive as it might be if it has to wait for the circle of doom to clear before being able to connect to the internet.

Devon and Somerset have been blighted by many issues with the connection programme, but I take this chance to thank Connecting Devon and Somerset for improving our connectivity. I am delighted to see more improvements and more policy areas, and I also thank Openreach for its roll-out of broadband in rural Britain. However, the road map for rolling out broadband simply does not work in a rural environment in the same way as it does in an urban one. Our policies need a reality check before being released into the countryside.

I am grateful particularly to Openreach for the work it has done in connecting my constituency, but the magnitude of the task is huge. The Openreach senior team met me in Barnstaple early in my time as an MP and asked for a challenging part of my patch to connect, and it has done a sterling job connecting the stunning

Lynton and Lynmouth, with fibre now running down the funicular railway. While residents and I are hugely grateful, what Openreach describes as a “rural project” is my fourth largest town. In rural Britain, the expectation is that everything is small, but the distances certainly are not, and connecting remote farms remains a huge challenge that the current schemes will not deliver in the timeframe we need for rural productivity gains to drive our rural economy.

I take this opportunity to thank the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport team and Building Digital UK for their engagement on this topic. I know that solutions are not easy, and while I sound like a record stuck in a groove talking about rural broadband, it is not right that the countryside is left behind in this way. We are aware that we have a productivity gap across all the south-west, with large numbers of part-time workers, partly driven by an ageing population, the seasonality of our tourism industry and in particular by a skills gap. We are desperately short of skilled workers. Devon has the lowest proportion of degree-educated 20 to 30-year-olds in the country, and much of that is driven by the extreme house prices and the cost of getting to work from somewhere cheaper.

Low aspiration is also a feature of much of northern Devon, generating low social mobility. When we peer into why that might be the case, so much to my mind comes back to distance. We are more than 60 miles from a university, and there is also the challenge of just getting to school or college. When rural schools have a catchment area the size of Birmingham, it is no wonder that the policies that work well in Birmingham, for example, might not translate so well to North Devon.

For example, school transport is the only way that most children can get to school, so after-school activities are not accessible to far too many of them. Schools would like to extend the school day, but that is seemingly not possible. One very rural school aspired to have a sixth form that offered only science, technology, engineering and maths, so students could continue to access 16-plus education using the school transport network, but that was not allowed because city-centric education policies determine that a school has to have 12 subjects—and so it goes on.

We have to adapt our policies to rural locations. We must listen to the excellent headteachers who run those schools and who believe that they are better placed to manage budgets and deliver services, such as special educational needs and school transport, than our distant and disinterested county council. Levelling up is all about equality of opportunity, but that simply does not exist for far too many youngsters growing up in the country, given the lack of flexibility afforded to too many rural schools.

The sheer size of Devon makes it look generally average in many areas, but as I have described in the House before, that hides huge disparities, particularly between north and south. The average that is applied to education for large education authorities has a disproportionate impact on remote rural communities trying to access additional funding and drive up skills, which would hopefully begin to tackle some of the too-often-seen rural poverty.

Devon has the longest road network in the country by 2,000 miles. Everyone who lives in rural Britain travels huge distances, which has an impact on many

[Selaine Saxby]

other services. Social care in particular, following an urban model, costs a fortune in rural locations because teams have to travel huge distances between visits. With fuel costs soaring, councils urgently need help with budgets.

Having spoken with the chief exec of my hospital on Friday, however, we both feel that it is not just money that is needed; we need to rethink social care in rural communities. Even if we had the money, we do not have any staff to work in social care, mostly because of the complete lack of affordable housing. Our health service has 20% vacancies for similar reasons. We are aware of surgeons unable to take up posts at our hospital because of the lack of housing that even they can afford. There is the frustration of being home to what is defined as a small—it is also the most remote—mainland hospital. It is detailed in our manifesto as one of the 40 in the hospital programme and the first phase is to deliver key worker housing. For that project not to be progressing at pace is hugely disappointing.

There is a lack of joined-up thinking across Departments when tackling rural issues. About a quarter of hospital beds in my patch are taken up by those in need of social care, but no one is available to provide it, so they cannot go home. It is hard to deliver health in such a vast setting. I know that ambulance wait times are a challenge, but when the distances that ambulances have to travel are so great, just getting to people takes time. For people to then get to hospital and find that they cannot get in—I have no words.

Similarly, I cannot build the houses that we desperately need or ensure that the properties we have are not left empty for half the year as second homes or holiday lets. I would be doing my constituents a disservice if, while talking about health, I did not mention that Devon is a dental desert, as are many other parts of rural Britain. Despite forwarding numerous innovative solutions, we have heard nothing back. This is not the place to go into that in detail, but the Department of Health and Social Care should also look at how rural health outcomes can be levelled up.

Rurality plays out in many other ways. Many Westminster decisions are based on the density of population, which means that we will always miss out on funding decisions. Active travel is a case in point. My county council submitted six schemes to the last round of funding, the second ranked of which was the Tarka trail in my patch. Although that is more for leisure than commuter journeys, the scheme is considered vital for the safety of cyclists on the trail and is the missing link in a hugely popular tourist destination, because it would connect the north and south coasts of Devon. Despite being my county council's second choice, the Department for Transport gave funding to the five other schemes, which are in towns and cities, and excluded the only rural one.

Buses are also tricky and we are desperately short of public transport. If the county council has its way and the threats made by its leader come to pass, it will cut all our services. Again, this is about not just funding: buses are too big for the number of passengers in many villages who want to use them. We need to find innovative solutions beyond funding to rural transport if we ever want to decarbonise our journeys and facilitate affordable routes to work. We also need to recognise that urban models do not always translate to rural journeys.

I worry that many of the potential solutions to levelling up rural Britain lie with our local councils. Unfortunately, in Devon, there are many issues in this space. To my mind, the urban policy of mayors does not translate well to rural Britain. From listening to what some of them get up to when I am up here, I am not sure how well the policy works full stop. What we really need to help level up rural Britain is more local decision making.

In Devon, we have far too many councils, with one county council, two unitaries, eight districts and, in North Devon alone, 58 town and parish councils. Trying to get something as simple as painting a lamp post done is near impossible in some town centres, as no one knows who owns it and it is always a different council's problem. The separation of highways from planning decisions is so fundamentally flawed it is desperate. We need devolution of decision making, and we need it more locally. Our county council is so big and distant, and it takes decisions with no consultation of local communities or their MP—I found out yesterday that part of my road scheme is being cancelled.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Might I urge on my hon. Friend and Devon colleagues what we did in Dorset? Creating two unitaries has made decision making far more streamlined, and it has made the connection between Members of Parliament, councillors and officers much easier. We know exactly who is doing what, and we can get things done.

**Selaine Saxby:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I hope that such discussions might be forthcoming in my county.

My district council officers, like so many, worked their socks off to try to deliver levelling-up bids. It was the smaller bids in rural locations that so often missed out in the first round of funding. I will take this opportunity to plug Ilfracombe's bid, against a planning backdrop of no staff and multiple district councils all battling the same issues.

Why is this important? Of the 10 most economically vulnerable parts of Devon, five are in my North Devon constituency—three in Ilfracombe and two in Barnstaple. The response of the county council leader when discussing possible unitary groupings was that no one wanted Barnstaple. That is entirely clear from the way we are treated by our county council.

However, let me take this opportunity to thank the numerous councillors who do such great work in our local communities. Fifty-eight councils is a lot. Many of them are marvellous, with great rural solutions from hard-working volunteers; others make Dibley look well-functioning and progressive. Changes we made to the monitoring of parish councils make it near impossible to remove a parish councillor, whatever they do. I hope that can be revisited. If only we could remove some of the layers of bureaucracy and avoid duplication, and find better ways to share best practice in a rural environment, we could achieve so much more.

I have touched on the housing challenges in North Devon and so many rural and coastal communities. The influx of second homes and short-term holiday lets, and the lack of regulation in the market, makes housing the No. 1 challenge for so many communities like North Devon. Doing nothing is simply no longer an option. The fabric of our society cannot survive with no one



available to work because there is nowhere for them to live. I covered this issue in detail only last week, so I will spare the House today, but I very much hope that the proposed amendments to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will be adopted to begin to tackle these issues, alongside the long-awaited Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport consultation on registration schemes for Airbnbs.

I have chosen not to speak today about our beautiful environment and our fabulous farmers, who have numerous levelling-up challenges of their own. I very much hope that next week's announcement on environmental land management schemes will be favourable to their finances, and I hope that colleagues will tackle these issues. I wanted to highlight some of the realities of rural living, behind the chocolate-box façade. We have to find ways to join up our thinking here at Westminster and recognise that, if we want to level up rural Britain, it is not just the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that can deliver that. Not only do councils clearly need funding to tackle the additional costs that rurality brings, but their structures need urgent reform.

The now Prime Minister was a signatory to the application for the debate while he was in between jobs, so to speak. From speaking with him last night, I have confidence that rural Britain will be better cared for, and that levelling up will reach into our remote, beautiful communities. When I came to this place in 2019 and first spoke about levelling up Ilfracombe, which is home to two of the poorest wards in Devon, I hoped that levelling up would, by this point, have delivered more than just an asylum hotel. I will continue to champion the need for levelling up rural Britain.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am a little more optimistic about the time limit. It does not have to be six minutes. We will begin with a formal time limit of eight minutes.

4.39 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), who set out an important case.

It is to be blessed to live in a community such as Cumbria and Westmorland, and to enjoy the beautiful scenery of South Lakeland, Eden, the dales and the Lake district. It is something I feel hugely privileged to be able to enjoy. Nevertheless, it is important to say—it is a bit of a cliché—“You cannot eat the view.” Many people in our communities are struggling, now more than ever, to make ends meet. Public services are struggling to do the same because, as we know, in rural communities public services cost more money to run. We are running them over much larger areas, serving a smaller number of people. It is clear that this Government, in terms of the funding given to our rural communities, do not yet get that in any practical way. Those living in communities such as Cumbria feel overlooked and taken for granted by this Government and that must end. The Rural Services Network looked at the Government's own metrics for levelling up and applied them region by region. It noted that, on the Government's own metrics, rural England is the poorest region of England.

Let us start on housing. In my community, over the past two years, the number of holiday lets has increased by more than a third. We can see a clearing out of the long-term private rented sector, which means that families and individuals are being not just evicted from their homes, but ejected from their communities. That means hundreds and hundreds of people who are coming to me for help are unable to work and have to take their children out of school. They move out of the area altogether. Without action to tackle excessive second home ownership and excessive numbers of holiday lets in communities such as ours, the community will cease to exist.

We have a bed-blocking rate of 32% in our local hospital trust at present, because the places where care workers would have been able to live are no longer available or affordable for them. So it is more than high time that the Government accept amendments I introduced in the Bill Committee, and will put again on the Floor of this House, for local authorities and national parks to have powers to decide that second homes, holiday lets and domestic residences are three separate categories of planning use to control and preserve homes for local people and families. Words will not cut it—action is what is needed.

On health, in our community in South Lakeland, we have seen a 16% reduction and in Eden a 17% reduction in the number of GPs serving in the last six years. When we see huge waiting times for people to see a GP, that is not the fault of GPs—let us not level it at their door. It may be the fault of the Government, who removed the minimum practice income guarantee, which makes surgeries such as the Central Lakes surgery in Ambleside and Hawkshead unsustainable, with GPs handing back their contract. Unless the Government consider proposals such as mine for the sustainable small surgeries fund that will allow small surgeries to survive, we will see more and more GPs leaving our area and more and more rural communities without a GP.

There is not a single NHS dentist place in the whole of Cumbria at this moment. Only a third of adults and barely a half of children have seen a dentist in the last two years. It is obvious that the unit of dental activity treadmill that is applied is pushing dentists out of the NHS, particularly in rural communities such as mine.

On cancer services, in South Lakeland, 41% of people with a cancer diagnosis are not getting treatment for more than two months, and in Eden in the north of Cumbria 59% of people with a cancer diagnosis are not being seen within 62 days. That is in no small part down to the Government's failure to invest in the diagnostics and treatment needed. We have been asking for years for a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal that would meet those people's needs and save lives. The Government could easily provide that. Levelling up means nothing if it does not deliver services that will save the lives of the people who live in rural communities.

On transport, in rural communities, one of the features that unites us is that there are huge distances between where people live, work and study and the services they use. It just takes a long time. Therefore, it is all the more important that the Government take action to ensure that we do not have failing rail services. One of the reasons many of us are still here at this time on a

[Tim Farron]

Wednesday is that we could not reasonably get home because of the failure of west coast rail, the Avanti service, at present.

Let us look at what levelling up means for rural stations. The footfall for rural stations such as Staveley, Grange, Windermere, Oxenholme and Penrith, Appleby, and Cark and Cartmel is relatively small and, therefore, funding is hard to get hold of. Staveley station has 28 steps to get up to it. It is totally and utterly inaccessible for anyone with a pram or disability, yet no form of funding pot that exists already will ever give a station of that kind the funding needed to make it accessible to the people who live close by. Levelling up means the Government recognising that they have to provide funding for those kinds of services, or else we will not get them.

Let us think of the threat to our ticket offices at Oxenholme, Penrith on the main line and places such as Grange, Windermere and Appleby. Those are vital ticket offices for the people who use those stations, yet because they are relatively small and because the Department for Transport continues to give sanction to the rail companies to look at scaling back those ticket offices, they are under threat. If the Government were committed to levelling up rural communities, they would recognise that communities such as ours are a special case and put an end to that.

I will say something about farming. The movement towards the environmental land management scheme is a positive thing, or at least the aim is. But the fact that only 1% of farmers have the sustainable farming incentive so far shows that the transition is bogged down and is forcing farmers out of the industry altogether. That is why the Government need to plough ahead with ELMS but make it fair and accessible to everyone, ensuring that active farmers get the money, not wealthy landowners who do not farm. They must ensure that we do not have a situation where people lose their basic payment before they get the new payment.

It is a wonderful thing to be a farmer. What do they do every morning? They wake up and have on their to-do list to feed the country and save the planet. What an awesome task it is that we give our farmers. We should be grateful to them, yet the Government's botching of the transition to the new system and their signing of unfair trade deals that throw our farmers under the bus show how little they value our farmers.

Finally, rural schools are smaller. Their budgets are smaller to start off with and the unfunded pay rises and unfunded increases in energy costs mean that every single one of the schools I have spoken to in my constituency over the last week are planning staff reductions. That will only hurt our children. The Government do not understand that they need to support rural school funding, and it is only the children who will suffer.

We have fewer than half a million full-time residents in Cumbria, and more than 20 million visitors. We are not funded to pay for the services that those visitors use. We are delighted that the visitors come, but if levelling up is to mean anything, the Government must respect places such as Westmorland, the lakes and dales—the whole of Cumbria—so that we have the resources to meet the needs of the community that lives there full time and those who visit.

4.47 pm

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker for the opportunity to make a contribution to this vital debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing it.

Many of my constituents may wonder why I am speaking in a debate about rural Britain. I am blessed with a diverse constituency, of which the wonderful town of Redditch constitutes only one part. I am privileged to represent parts of the Wychavon district including the Lenches, Cookhill, Abbots Morton, Inkberrow, Stock and Bradley Green, Hanbury and parts of Feckenham. Assuming the boundary changes go ahead as set out this week, in future the constituency will also include the wards of Harvington and Norton, and Dodderhill, which will mean that the MP for Redditch will represent Lenchwick, Upton Warren, Wychbold and Stoke Works.

It is vital that when we speak about levelling up we do not confine ourselves to a mythical north-south divide, but consider inequalities within constituencies and the rural-urban divide. Even areas that look prosperous and, in fact, are prosperous on the surface can hide considerable deprivation that we ought not to be afraid to care about. It is right to help the most vulnerable in my constituency, wherever they live. Within the new constituency boundary there is a ward that is in the most deprived 20% nationally, in Harvington and Norton.

Although my remarks could cover a plethora of subjects important to my rural constituents, such as healthcare, the environment, planning, crime, education, speeding, agriculture and nature to name but a few, as I have only limited time, I will concentrate on three key pledges that I made to my constituents.

First, on rural transport, bus services are absolutely vital for my constituents to access work, leisure and education, and these services are still recovering from the impact of the pandemic all over the country. That is why I strongly welcome the actions of the Government and Conservative-run Worcestershire County Council, which has, with the help of the bus recovery grant, safeguarded more than 200 routes across Worcestershire that were on the verge of collapse. Unfortunately, that intervention clearly cannot be sustained forever, which is why I think that demand-responsive transport is a vital link in this jigsaw.

The plans are to expand demand-responsive transport to include rural areas in 2023, but unfortunately the county council does not have any specific support from the Government to do that, so it will have to be a trade-off between subsidising services and investing in demand-responsive transport. It would be really helpful if the Government were able to revisit the bus service improvement plan funding, as Worcestershire got nothing, but the urban West Midlands, just up the road, got more than £86 million, and it already benefits from higher passenger numbers. There are rumours of a second round for BSIP, but nothing concrete as yet, so I would be grateful if the Minister said in his concluding remarks if he is aware of any further funding that could be made available.

Secondly, broadband is an ongoing issue, as we have already heard from other colleagues, and it affects my rural constituents as well. In fact, I live in a rural area of my constituency and often need to work from home, and like many of my constituents I know the impact

this has. It is not only professionals who are impacted by poor broadband access, but children and young people who need to complete homework, access education, or get involved in local community and youth groups.

I really welcome the progress that the Government have made in rolling out broadband across the country under the £5 billion Project Gigabit programme, together with the £500 million investment in the shared rural network. In fact, figures from the House of Commons Library show that more than 96% of households and businesses in my constituency do have access to superfast broadband. The data show that Redditch is one of the best-connected constituencies in the country, with average broadband speeds 28% higher than the national average.

Of course, this is great news, but as in all things, the details show that there is patchy coverage. My recent broadband survey, which I sent to 3,000 homes in the villages, demonstrated that there is still more to do. Hundreds of residents completed the survey, which was sent to villagers in Feckenham, Bradley Green, Stock Green, Cookhill, Inkberrow, the Lenches, Hanbury and the surrounding areas. I heard of many who are still living with the consequences of being in a hard-to-reach area. I am determined to continue pressing for better connectivity for all my constituents, whether they live in a hotspot or a notspot.

Thirdly, on planning and housing, it is right that we always seek to balance the two potentially competing demands of building the new homes our communities and young people need, and of seeking to preserve the reason why people live here in the first place, which is the unique and beautiful character of the Worcestershire environment. I pay tribute to Wychavon District Council, which is working with the renowned organisation Create Streets with an aspiration for Wychavon to become a leading rural authority for good urban design.

However, I must say a word about the proposed solar farm development at Roundhill, which I am afraid is not an example of good design, placemaking or sustainability. This proposal would plonk 287 acres—140 football pitches—of solar panels on good agricultural land. I have worked closely with the members of the Roundhill Wood solar farm opposition group, and as a result of hearing their concerns, I carried out a survey of hundreds of residents living in the local area to gauge their views. The overwhelming majority of course support renewable energy, but they are opposed or strongly opposed to the development for many reasons, including the in my view very good reason that this land ought to be used to grow food, especially at this time of war in Ukraine when we as a nation should be shoring up our food security. No one is opposed to such renewable energy, but it should be installed on rooftops, car parks, office buildings or brownfield land. I want to thank the campaigners for all the hard work they are doing and to let them know that I will continue to stand up for them. I do not believe that our levelling-up agenda will be served by solar farms of this scale and size.

Finally, whether people live in Redditch or the villages, everyone is worried about the cost of living and the impact on the most vulnerable, so I welcome the investment from Wychavon District Council in the form of targeted interventions for the most disadvantaged children, including speech and language hubs, after-school clubs, specialist help with maths, breakfast clubs and social mobility

grants, which help those not in education, employment or training with opportunities to progress and enter the jobs market.

As we look to the Budget next week, I urge the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to continue their commitment to levelling up in rural Worcestershire as well as our town centre. Levelling up rural Worcestershire and the villages of my constituency is not done to the detriment of Redditch town centre. It is not a zero sum game—quite the contrary. By making our wonderful villages attractive, accessible and desirable, we encourage people to come to our county and use the facilities in Redditch town centre. It is a win-win that creates a virtuous circle of growth and prosperity, with more business for local shops and leisure facilities, and more residents paying taxes to fund the vital public services that we all rely on, such as the Alex in particular.

Rural local authorities still receive 37% less in settlement funding assessment per head than urban areas. So it is clear that we must focus on levelling up the whole country and ensuring that rural Worcestershire is not left behind in this essential mission.

4.55 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): North Shropshire is a lovely place to live, with beautiful countryside, historic market towns and warm, welcoming people. I encourage everybody to come and visit. But behind the bucolic scenes, North Shropshire and indeed large parts of the rest of rural Britain are beginning to fall behind their urban counterparts.

Levelling up was the second most popular catchphrase of 2019. While it had not a lot of meaning for the northern towns that it was aimed at, it had virtually none at all for rural Britain. If we want our rural communities on a level playing field with the towns in the north, and indeed the south, we need to address the causes of the problems that have led to dysfunction in many sectors of the economy and society.

We have young people leaving rural areas in search of work at the same time that local employers from all sectors are struggling to fill vacancies. Our hospitals are full to capacity, with ambulances queuing outside the front, while beds are taken up by people who could be cared for at home. We have pensioners and young people desperate to get out into the towns to spend their money, but they have no cars and no alternative way to get there.

On Friday, I visited the excellent Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Gobowen near Oswestry. It is a good example of how dysfunction can affect a place. It is undoubtedly one of the best hospitals in the country, with a fantastic reputation, excellent patient satisfaction and some of the world's finest surgeons. Most medics would be honoured to work there, and yet it has a vacancy rate of 14%. Two key reasons behind that are a lack of affordable housing and a lack of public transport to the hospital. The nurses who work there are unable to get home after a 12-hour shift because a hospital with world-class facilities is being let down by a fourth-class public transport system. If they make the move to work in that top-class hospital environment, they will struggle to find a flat to rent not because they are too expensive but simply because not enough furnished flats are available on the market.



[Helen Morgan]

People of working age obviously need to be able to find a secure home in the area where they want to live and to be able to access all the public services that will give them a decent quality of life, but those services are being cut because local government budgets are taking the strain of the pandemic and of Conservative chaos. Our councils need to be properly funded, but the Local Government Association reports that local authorities face a funding gap of £3.4 billion next year and £4.5 billion in 2024-25 just to stand still, so improving services seems a distant prospect.

Shropshire council is reportedly spending 84% of its budget on social care. As the population gets older, the pressure on services gets higher and more young people leave—and the cycle continues. If rural Britain is going to thrive, that cycle needs to be reversed. It should start with the industry that is already the success story of rural Britain: farming. However, the Conservatives have taken our farmers for granted by bargaining away their level trading field for one pitched firmly in favour of their Australian and New Zealand competitors.

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I very much hope that the hon. Lady will talk about the three cases in Shropshire up for assessment for levelling-up funding. The one for modernising Shrewsbury town centre in my constituency is extremely important. Will she welcome that project? As she knows, a thriving county town is good for the whole of our county.

**Helen Morgan:** I supported a levelling-up bid in my own constituency as well, but I will come on to the nature of bidding for small pots of money.

The Government have implemented a new subsidy scheme so complex and tedious to access that only 2,000 out of 83,000 farmers nationally have applied to join it, despite the aims of the scheme being good. Unable to plan ahead through the constant chaos, many farmers are leaving the industry, taking local jobs, and indeed food security, with them. Grand schemes and big infrastructure projects are all very well, and they benefit the towns that win them, but they are no use to the people who cannot get to those towns in the first place. I will come on to that shortly, but before I do I want to talk about digital infrastructure.

It is not surprising that the UK is one of the least efficient countries in Europe when, in 2022, one in 10 of my constituents still cannot get internet speeds above 10 megabytes per second. It is not fair to expect rural businesses to compete with their urban counterparts when they cannot connect with their customers or suppliers. Connecting rural areas both digitally and physically is key to improving their futures.

Last week, I heard from a pensioner near Market Drayton who was without a driving licence for 18 months—a Government failing for another day—and was therefore effectively under house arrest, only allowed out on day release once a week when the local charity bus passed by. He and his wife wanted to contribute to the local economy but were held back from doing so because they could not get to the high street. We live in a country where nearly £18 billion has been spent on a rail service in one of the best-connected cities in the

world, but in Shropshire on a Sunday there is only one bus service running in the whole of the county, and Market Drayton is at risk of losing its one-hourly service on a Saturday as well. Boosting bus services will reconnect communities, enable young people to access work and social opportunities, and benefit healthcare, the economy and the environment.

The reality is that the Conservatives have taken the votes of rural Britain for granted for so long they have just stopped listening to its needs. Take the cost of living crisis, which is undoubtedly worse in rural areas. Housing costs are higher, food costs are higher and transport costs are higher. Houses are often older and more expensive to heat and wages are lower, but if your home is off-grid the support available is a measly £100, to which access is the best-kept secret in Britain.

We need to fund our councils fairly so they can provide not only the social care to free up our hospitals and ambulance services, but the other services taxpayers expect to improve the quality of life of all residents. We need to invest in our digital infrastructure for businesses, and to encourage young people to stay and work in the local area. We need to allow councils to develop and deliver housing plans that meet the specific requirements of their economies and communities. Councils bidding for small pots of money to spend on isolated projects that will go way over budget because of the economic chaos will not deliver that. Giving the power to our councils, properly funded to be able to deliver them, will deliver for our communities. We really need to address this point now.

5.2 pm

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing the debate.

Whether we come from the north of England, the Lakes, Shropshire, Devon or Oxfordshire, many of the issues being discussed are common to all of us. Rural areas may not get the focus from Governments that they feel they ought to have because only 17% of the population of England live in rural areas. Alternatively, it may be because of the phenomenon many of us have alluded to: rural areas are the places where we go on holiday; they look beautiful and the countryside is fantastic. My part of the world—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) will agree with many of the things I say about Oxfordshire—might have fantastic countryside and Cotswold stone houses, but that can mask some real challenges. The house might be beautiful, but the person who lives in it might be suffering from rural isolation; they might be suffering because they heat their home with heating oil, the price of which has gone up. It is important that we start to look at the particular challenges that areas face.

I will make only one point that I would like the Minister to address in his response. We could debate many things—housing, connectivity, health services, education—but I want to concentrate on levelling up. We all agree that levelling up must mean not just the north and the south, but rural areas as well as urban areas. It must mean, essentially, that wherever someone live or comes from, they can have their fair crack of the whip and make the most of their opportunities, and that their area has a chance to grow. I will focus on the incredible economic opportunities in some rural areas.

According to the House of Commons Library, first, productivity tends to be lower in rural areas—we need to consider in detail why—and secondly, some of the differences in productivity are ones where there should not necessarily be any difference between a rural and an urban area. The Library states that

“for example, financial and insurance activities make up 6% of output in predominantly urban areas outside London, but just 2% of output in predominantly rural areas. Information and communication businesses show a similar difference (7% in urban areas, 3% in rural areas).”

There is an incredible untapped resource, which the Government need to look into. We need to ensure that the people living in those areas who show incredible innovation—those who have come up with an idea, become an entrepreneur, taken a chance and grown a business—can make absolutely everything of it. That is what we should look at. All of us will say that funding must be given fairly to rural areas, much as it is to urban areas, but I want to start looking at what we can do to ensure that we unlock those businesses.

One or two things would be transformative in unlocking those economic opportunities. The first is rural transport. In West Oxfordshire, someone in one of the areas a bit further away from Witney—perhaps in the Wychwoods or out past Burford—might rely on a car to go to a doctor’s appointment, for example. But as my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said, it is possible to have demand-responsive rural transport, and we should see more of that. Let us start acting in a smarter way so that people can help the environment and travel more cost-effectively, but not by having one policy that appertains to an urban area and another that appertains to a rural area. Let us make sure that people in these incredible, beautiful villages, which are home to some of the most innovative, imaginative, daring, bold and creative people in the world, can get to our market towns and into our cities.

Secondly, communication of the non-physical kind is also key. Thankfully, due to some of the policies that the Government have rolled out over the past few years, West Oxfordshire is much better connected by broadband than it was when I was first elected, so there has been huge progress. However, we must have real connectivity for mobile phones—those small devices that all of us carry in our pockets, and which are utterly essential to the way we live our lives—to ensure that wherever people are, they can make contact with the people they are working with, can connect with others and can grow their areas.

There are challenges in rural areas, and areas where we need to make sure that people are not left behind. Wherever someone lives—in a relatively remote Oxfordshire village or further afield in a much more remote part of the United Kingdom—they should be able to get all the benefits of living in the UK. More than that, there is enormous untapped economic potential in these villages that can be unlocked, if we are strategic and smart about the policies that we as central Government have. It seems to me that connectivity of both the digital and physical kinds is key to making sure that our rural areas—

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Robert Courts:** I was on my last couple of words before finishing, but I would be delighted to give way.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** Does my hon. Friend agree that light rail also has a part to play in many rural areas? In Hertfordshire, we are looking at putting in a light railway between Welwyn Garden City and Harlow, and I am arguing that, in north Hertfordshire, we should eventually have a link between Buntingford and Stevenage. Those are not as expensive in a rural context as they would be in a city.

**Robert Courts:** My right hon. and learned Friend makes a very good point. Rail of all kinds can have real importance in connecting rural areas. It depends; the point of being smart about what we do is that each area is different, so what may be right for his area may not be right for mine or another Member’s.

In my area, I am keen to see a further redoubling of the Cotswold line, which hon. Members have heard me speak about before. If we ensure that Hanborough, my local station, has faster and more frequent services to Oxford and London, we could use it as a hub for West Oxfordshire’s transport, with regular bus services in the area and cycle paths to the station. What will work in the area is faster transport to Oxford, the nearest major city, and then through to London. My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. Flexibility and smart policy will ensure that our rural areas have all the many economic and social benefits of being part of modern Britain.

5.10 pm

**Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). He has been such a powerful campaigner for improvements to the quality of water in our rivers and in his West Oxfordshire constituency, so it is great to hear him speak about the subject. My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), also made a powerful speech.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), who is a member of the all-party parliamentary group on rural services, which I chair, on securing the debate. It will not surprise the House that I will focus my brief remarks on the role that the Government have to play in improving the allocation of funding to rural areas.

The metrics for measuring rural deprivation in the funding formula are regrettably flawed, as the Prime Minister recognised when he toured the country this summer. He was roundly criticised for pointing out that even in seemingly more affluent areas of the countryside, there is real rural deprivation. Our political opponents tried to make fun of him for being out of touch, but he represents one of the largest rural constituencies in England and what he said revealed that he is completely in touch with what is going on in real rural Britain. At present, the indices used to measure multiple deprivation do not adequately take his point into account. The Rural Services Network, which supports the all-party group I chair, has provided a useful briefing on this debate for colleagues. It has found that rural areas receive 37%—£105—less per head in Government funding than their urban counterparts.

Rural communities not only receive poorer services, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon pointed out, but suffer as a result of lower wages—£2,500 less per head, on average—and face significantly higher costs.

[Philip Dunne]

Rural residents pay 21%, or some £104, more per head in council tax bills than their urban counterparts because the Government grant is distributed in favour of urban areas. Weekly transport costs are about £40 higher; rural families spend 4% more of their disposable income on transport each week. In many larger rural areas, and particularly in Shropshire, public transport is very thin on the ground, so people have to rely on cars. The way energy prices have been going, the £40 figure, which predates the energy crisis, will be an underestimate.

Nowhere are these issues more apparent than in my constituency. Ludlow is geographically the sixth largest constituency in England; following the proposals announced yesterday by the Boundary Commission, it will become the fifth largest by gaining 100 square miles from my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), whom I am pleased to see supporting the debate. Rural areas have their own inherent beauty, and the lack of people—the sparsity of population—is one of the reasons why they are pleasant places to live and why people choose to live there. However, population density is a fundamental problem because the allocation of funding from central Government is based on people. With just 56 people per square kilometre, Ludlow has one of the lowest population densities of any constituency in England.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** The size of Shropshire's elderly population is disproportionate, and our social care costs are going through the roof. Our council spends 83p in each pound of its budget on adult social care costs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as well as levelling up, the Government need to do more to support our councils in this regard?

**Philip Dunne:** The pressures of social care costs in areas whose demographics make them particularly acute are reaching crisis level. We notice that in Shrewsbury in particular, and the same point was made by the hon. Member for North Shropshire.

As others have pointed out, we also suffer from poor broadband provision speeds. Although broadband accessibility may be there as a result of the Government's gigabit programme, the speeds in rural areas are about a third slower than those in urban areas. We also have problems with access to public transport, as I have already mentioned. Fewer than 50% of rural residents have access to a further education site within 30 minutes of their homes via public transport. Access to both employment and education is a challenge. Rural residents are now more reliant on off-grid energy generation; many face huge rises in the cost of domestic heating oil this winter as about a third of Shropshire households are not connected to the gas grid.

It is therefore critical that the Government continue to connect rural homes to superfast broadband, support rural transport provision, and, as a matter of urgency, clarify the way in which those in off-grid homes—including residents of park homes and others who do not pay their own electricity bills—can gain access to help with their energy bills.

I strongly encourage the Minister to look again at the funding formula. Although Shropshire is an objectively affluent county, two of its lower-layer super output

areas fall within the 10% most deprived in the country, including one in Ludlow. However, they are unlikely to be highlighted by any of the national indices of deprivation that the Minister's officials will draw to his attention.

The Rural Services Network is offering some suggestions to encourage closer alignment of funding formulas with the reality of rural living, and to ensure that they reflect the increased cost of delivery in rural areas. I should be happy to discuss these issues with the Minister, through the all-party parliamentary group. In addition to the metrics already included in the White Paper, metrics such as the proportion of those in fuel poverty, the frequency of public transport services, the percentage of premises with superfast broadband and the distance to further education providers would all supply a more accurate snapshot of inequality in rural areas.

Finally, let me add to the comments of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, and encourage the Minister to look favourably on the levelling-up bids from Shropshire Council, including the Craven Arms "gateway to growth" bid, which I have been pleased to support. The bid would deliver a major transport infrastructure project in the heart of south Shropshire, and would unlock undeveloped employment land. This would provide up to 50,000 square metres of space for jobs, and a further 500 residential dwellings in a future phase. Unlocking new jobs, and opportunities for training and skills, ticks many of the boxes in the Minister's criteria. I urge him to consider accepting some of the bids in rural areas, so that those areas are not left behind in the levelling-up round that falls under his careful stewardship.

5.18 pm

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): As a Member of Parliament for a very rural constituency, albeit one in the home counties, I see all too clearly how our system of government tends to focus on the problems and needs of urban society in the UK and tends to neglect rural communities, which are so important to sustaining those urban environments. I therefore welcome the debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing it.

Rather than issuing a shopping list on behalf of my constituents, I am going to say something a bit more general about how we design, or do not design, rural policy in this country that will affect levelling up. We have had too many changes of DEFRA Ministers. I mean no offence to the new incumbent who will reply to this debate, but those Ministers have had differing priorities, and have experienced difficulty in holding other Departments to account for the effects of their decisions on rural areas. Local stakeholders are left feeling disengaged, and there is confusion among those who look after our rural areas, who tend to be the people who work there. Levelling up will not succeed unless this changes.

The House might be aware that I have long taken an interest in the need for Whitehall to develop a greater capability for strategic thinking in order to address the huge challenges that we face as a country, in domestic and environmental policy as well as foreign and security policy. I was Chair of the Public Administration Committee and then the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and we did three inquiries on this topic over a period of nine years. I continue to take in



interest in the subject with an informal group that held a conference at Ditchley Park recently, attended by the Cabinet Secretary.

Rural policy is crying out for a long-term strategic approach that will be sustained on a cross-party basis and so remain stable. It is slightly unfortunate—well, it is nice for us that there are not many Labour MPs cluttering up this debate, but it is unfortunate that there is not more engagement from them—[*Interruption.*] There is one Front-Bench spokesman, and I hope he will rise to the—

**Sir Oliver Heald:** There's a Whip there, look!

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I think this counts as an intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker. It should be added to my time. I hope that the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) will rise to the occasion.

The Ukraine war has exposed how vulnerable the global food supply system is to disruption. We cannot rely on our ability to buy food cheaply on the global market. Given today's labour shortage in agriculture and the impact of natural problems such as avian flu, we must expect more serious shortages and even more acute price rises this winter. Food security is fundamental, but it is frequently neglected and should now be addressed by the Government. In passing, I would add that the Rural Services Network recently reported that the cost of living crisis is worst in rural areas. Food and energy price increases are already putting rural food banks under huge strain. Brightlingsea food bank in my constituency is extremely well led and co-ordinated by Win Pomroy and offers incredible support to the most vulnerable people, but let us be clear that this is a fire engine dealing with a crisis on behalf of our constituents. I am sure that every Member will want to support their local food banks.

The main point, however, is that the changing nature of life in rural communities is outpacing the ability of our relevant institutions and policy processes to adapt and stay fit for purpose. Rural areas need a responsive, adaptable policy making and strategy process to handle the complexity caused by a combination of the increasingly rapid and profound changes in the wider world and the competing demands that we place on our countryside. These include the need to optimise food production, improve food security, reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, increase carbon sequestration, adapt to cope with climate change threats such as drought and flooding, enhance the wellbeing of the whole UK population by improving leisure and supporting access to the countryside, and improve conditions for wildlife and biodiversity, leaving a better natural environment and landscape for future generations.

In coastal constituencies such as mine and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon, who opened the debate, there is also a need to rewild our coastal waters, revive fish stocks and restore saltings and seagrass and kelp forests to revive their massive capacity for carbon sequestration. I recommend a book by my constituent Charles Clover of the Blue Marine Foundation entitled "Rewilding the Sea", which was launched in the House of Commons yesterday. It is incredibly ambitious, but it is important for the whole country to reconcile these often competing demands. It is not only essential but well within our grasp to achieve it. Governments must,

however, take the trouble to work with rural communities across the UK rather than prescribing for them, which is how most rural inhabitants see their situation today. Rural communities, in their turn, need better processes to make their voices heard in Whitehall, and to ensure that Whitehall draws on their unique local knowledge and expertise in formulating and delivering policy.

DEFRA's forthcoming environmental land management scheme—ELMS—replaces payments from the EU common agricultural policy, and it is due to be fully implemented in 2024. Its success is crucial to the effective functioning of rural policy and levelling up. I am afraid that the handouts from the Government for levelling up are a sticking plaster. What we need is a compressive approach to the rural economy. During its current trial phase, ELMS has been taken up by only a tiny percentage of farmers because what it offers is not very attractive to farmers. DEFRA needs to work closely with individual farm businesses to ensure that ELMS becomes fit for purpose.

**Sir Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): That is precisely why the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is starting a report on the implementation of ELMS and how it could be delivered more effectively.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am delighted, and I will recommend that a friend of mine submits evidence to the Committee. I will refer to his work later.

The Government need to empower and support farmers to undertake a wide range of practical routine tasks that are currently the responsibility of national agencies but that those agencies are unable to deliver because they do not have local expertise and knowledge. For example, the Environment Agency used to clear watercourses annually on lowland floodplains, but it has now abandoned the practice, resulting in disastrous flooding on what is often the most productive agricultural land in the UK. Farmers could be paid to do the work, subject to effective regulation.

Local groups should also be encouraged to take charge and work in collaboration with each other, and with the appropriate central and regional authorities. For example, the encouragement of wildlife is frequently focused on transforming, flooding or wilding separate individual locations. It would be far more effective to recruit farmers and landowners across an area to collaborate on creating wildlife oases linked by wooded, hedged or specially planted corridors, for which they could be appropriately reimbursed.

Now is the time to improve the policy delivery process by harnessing local knowledge and ability in conjunction with scientific expertise, bringing them together with the responsible Government bodies. The top of the civil service should work on enhancing cross-departmental governance processes in Whitehall, including by repairing Whitehall's broken policy and strategy-making mechanisms. I can vouch that permanent secretaries are keen on this.

From the bottom up, we need to encourage pilot projects that, if successful, can be scaled up and applied nationwide, appropriately amended to local conditions. One such pilot is being developed in south Cumbria, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), by local farmer and businessman John Geldard, whom the hon. Gentleman

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

is giving appropriate support. Mr Geldard is best known for championing the sale of high-quality local produce in supermarkets. Spurred on by the damage done by Storm Desmond, by the pandemic and by the current inflationary economic threat, Mr Geldard has built a multiskilled team that is now addressing a range of challenges with increasing success. As part of this project, for example, he has a senior policeman improving local policing.

**Tim Farron:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this point. The area Mr Geldard farms in the Lyth valley is often subject to flooding, which is a reminder that sometimes we need to invest in infrastructure to allow good-quality agricultural land to operate as good-quality agricultural land, otherwise we will not be able to feed ourselves as a country or to do the good work that is needed on biodiversity, of which Mr Geldard is such a good example.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

The policing initiative is being led by a retired local police officer, and it is transforming the countryside's ability to police itself and to deal with rural crime more effectively. I have been trialling such initiatives in my constituency, too.

We are not scrapping all the regulations. Of course, there has to be regulation. Some of the rhetoric has been overtaken by politics. Our population may be overwhelmingly urban, but England and the whole UK sees its countryside as its shire, embodying an ideal of harmony between humankind and nature. This national feeling is a force to be reckoned with, and Governments who trifle with it do so at their peril.

5.29 pm

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As the Member with the largest rural constituency outside the highlands—it is larger than any in England or Wales—I am pleased to be called to speak. I will not take up the eight minutes by reading out the more than 100 communities that make up that large and diverse constituency, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for bringing to the Floor of the House a debate on rural issues across Britain. In my experience, this House debates rural issues too rarely and has become far too metropolitan and urban-focused, which is a facet of our society generally. Sadly, I find things little different in our Scottish Parliament.

It is important that Members across Britain can debate these issues. The ones my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) raised are equally applicable in Leadhills in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) set out the right prognosis: we need to have a strategic approach if we are to maintain rural communities and a rural way of life. The one thing I did not think either really touched on—although they did in relation to funding—is that the most important Department we could have had represented here today is the Treasury. My experience is that the Treasury is the greatest impediment to investment in the rural parts of

the UK. That flows into the welcome levelling-up initiatives that are being taken by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and I will touch on those in my constituency.

I have raised this before, but many smaller rural local authorities are ill placed to put forward complex bids. The Treasury came forward with an initiative to put certain moneys into certain local authorities to allow them to take that forward, but their capacity is limited, as is their experience of doing so and their direct contact with Whitehall. If we are to go through these processes, it is important that rural and small local authorities are supported.

It is difficult to spend £20 million on a single project in a rural area, when we come to do the analysis. On levelling up and other proposals, there has been a lack of flexibility. Ultimately, I was able to negotiate, partly because my constituency, unusually, covers three county areas, for the project that was put forward to be in three separate parts, but there was a lot of resistance to that type of project.

Even when projects go forward, the usual suspects tend to be favoured. Although I welcome the community renewal funding that came to the south of Scotland, the organisations that ultimately received that funding had the capacity to make professional bids for it. I say to the Minister that they would not have been the choice of my constituents for that funding. If we are going to say that we have community renewal funding, we have to listen more to communities and what they want to do. Ultimately, that needs a loosening of the Green Book rules. Various announcements have been made at various times that the Green Book rules from the Treasury were to be loosened. They need to be if we are successfully to invest in rural areas.

I was struck by what the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) had to say, because his constituency in Cumbria is similar to mine in the south of Scotland, which is why I very much welcome the Borderlands initiative, which has brought the south of Scotland, Cumbria and Northumberland together to try to create capacity to take forward important rural projects. For example, Carlisle, although in the north of England, is very economically important to my constituency, so the initiative is important.

I recognise many of the problems that have been mentioned. Although I am sure that we will hear from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that there is some sort of Utopia in Scotland, I can confirm that a resident in Dumfries and Galloway has no access to an NHS dentist. Indeed, 10 days ago, NHS Dumfries and Galloway was so overwhelmed by patients that it could not manage the situation. Many of the issues are very much the same in Scotland and need the same innovative approaches that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex spoke about. If we want to sustain rural communities, we have to think innovatively about how to do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you would expect me to mention the three projects in my constituency that are going forward as part of the Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale levelling-up bid. They include the rejuvenation of Annan Harbour. I congratulate the Annan Harbour action group on its innovative work over a long period. It will see the rejuvenation of the Ministers' Merse and the creation of a bunk house

and café. It will revitalise that part of Annan. There is the rejuvenation of the Chambers Institute, the equivalent of the town hall, in the heart of Peebles, and the Clydesdale walkway, which will look to bring together various existing walking and cycling trails in the south of Scotland to create the possibility for people to walk from Stranraer to Eyemouth, which I am sure appeals, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to take advantage of the rural tourism opportunities in the area. I also commend the Dumfries and Galloway transport bid, which is to bring electric buses to the area for those who perhaps find the walking a little too much.

In summary, the important point is that, across Britain, we need to take a new and more urgent approach to tackling rural issues. It is not just about single, one-off bids and funding. They are welcome, but if we are to sustain rural communities the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, we need a different approach, and the Treasury and changing its attitudes is central to that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I now have to reduce the time limit to seven minutes.

5.37 pm

**Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con):** On the Conservative Benches at least, there has been some competition over who has the biggest constituency. I cannot compete on size, but I believe that I have the most beautiful constituency. From the rugged splendour of the Midhope Moors, to the picturesque village of Cawthorne, the classical setting of Wentworth castle and the stunning landscapes of the Derwent valley, my Penistone and Stocksbridge constituency is a wonderful place in which to live.

Rural life has many advantages. It retains a sense of community that is often absent in big cities, and a connection with the physical realm—the seasons, the nature, the weather—that remind us of important realities and natural limits that can sometimes be forgotten in an increasingly virtual world. However, for many people, rural life is not an idyllic existence. My constituents share many of the challenges of urban areas, such as the rising cost of living and access to affordable family housing, but we also face some unique disadvantages that highlight the pressing need to include rural Britain in the levelling-up agenda. To state the obvious, and as other Members have said, the lower population density of rural places means that service models that work in urban areas are much less viable in our communities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) put this eloquently. The metrics that are used to describe the viability of urban services just do not work in rural areas; they have to have special cases.

I want to speak particularly about bus services, which over recent months have declined significantly in my constituency. Residents of Stocksbridge, Grenoside, Chapeltown, High Green, Ecclesfield, Wharncliffe Side, Oughtibridge and other villages have seen services reduced or even disappearing altogether, cutting people off from jobs, education, training, healthcare and leisure.

The impact on everyday life cannot be overstated. The old are left stranded at bus stops, the young arrive late for school and workers are forced to pay for taxis to get to work. Local employers offering good jobs have

told me of their difficulty in recruiting because their premises are no longer served by bus. The vision of levelling up is to spread opportunity evenly around the country, but it really does not matter how much opportunity there is if people cannot get to it.

What has gone wrong in South Yorkshire, particularly rural South Yorkshire, and how can we fix it? Services were struggling even before covid, but the post-pandemic environment has been a perfect storm for rural bus services in South Yorkshire. From my meetings with Stagecoach and First Bus, it is clear that patronage has fallen sharply at the same time as fuel costs have increased.

I was pleased to be successful over the summer in persuading the Government to release a third round of the covid bus recovery grant. But, crucially, the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority's bus service improvement plan bid failed completely, which resulted in our region's receiving not a single penny while neighbouring authorities in Manchester, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire received tens of millions of pounds.

I am grateful to the Bus Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), for meeting me this morning to discuss the issue, but I urge the Minister responding to this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), to press this matter with his Government colleagues. My constituents pay the same taxes as everybody else. It is not their fault that our combined authority's bid did not meet an acceptable standard.

Things may look bleak, but I believe there are some glimmers of hope. We have had local successes with the new No. 25 and No. 26 routes around Penistone and a new service connecting Northern College with Barnsley. Those services have reconnected isolated villages and are based on an innovative small bus model pioneered by the excellent South Pennine Community Transport.

In Stocksbridge and Deepcar, we have plans to use our towns fund to commission new buses to help residents to travel around our towns—for anyone who has not been there, Stocksbridge is incredibly steep and people absolutely need a bus to get back up the hill. We are also progressing with plans to restore a passenger rail service along the Upper Don valley and we have a levelling-up fund bid to improve the Penistone line.

However, we need to accept that a one-size-fits-all approach to public transport just does not work. Rural services will never be as profitable as urban routes, but, if they are designed sensibly around what communities actually want, if they are regular and reliable with easy-to-understand timetables, they can be self-sustaining, as we have seen with our new routes. Ultimately, levelling up rural transport requires a localism agenda, putting commissioning in the hands of local people—our town, parish and local councils—and with a funding model that recognises the unique challenges of rural life.

5.42 pm

**Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con):** It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) and to listen to her excellent speech—all the speeches have been excellent, I must say—and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this debate.



[Richard Drax]

I see that two of my colleagues from Dorset are here and longing to speak, so no doubt they will have a similar message to give the Minister. It is nice to see him in his place; I will target my seven minutes at him specifically and the Treasury even more so regarding the levelling-up bid that we have done once and we are now hoping to do again.

I would like to conjure up the picture of a cake—a chocolate cake, because that is my favourite. At school, when we had birthdays, a cake used to arrive and the teacher used to cut up the cake into the appropriate slices. My eye always fell on the slice that was slightly bigger because the teacher got it slightly wrong when he or she tried to divide the cake. We always hoped that we would get that slightly bigger slice, but of course we got the smaller one.

The point I am trying to make is that cutting up the cake is incredibly difficult, and the Government face all kinds of financial problems right now, but on behalf of South Dorset I ask for at least a slice of the cake. I do not want all of it, I do not want half of it but, for my constituents, can we please at last have a fair share of the cake? We have lost out again and again.

While it is true that Dorset as a whole is relatively prosperous, that perception masks significant pockets of deprivation. Weymouth, its largest urban area, hosts some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the county. My South Dorset parliamentary constituency, the vast majority of whose constituents are residents of Weymouth and Portland, is ranked as having the lowest level of social mobility in the country. Huge efforts are going in to try and improve that. We are trying to attract more businesses to raise the incomes, salaries, expectations, aspirations and education. We have heard about buses, broadband and all the other things with which I entirely agree. I am asking the Minister for just a little bit of money, so that the private sector can invest on the back of the investment by the Government. We know that the Government cannot give us all the money we want—that would just be impossible, and the country would be even worse off than it is now. What we want is enough money to try to attract the private sector into places such as Weymouth, Portland and Swanage, and other rural constituencies, so that the private sector can do all the hard work. However, it cannot do it unless the Government create the infrastructure so that the private sector is attracted.

I will give the House an example. In Weymouth, we have the most attractive harbour, a peninsula and a marina. The walls of those facilities have not been touched for 50 or 60 years and they are in poor repair. The Environment Agency will not allow us to regenerate around those areas until the walls have been repaired, which will cost millions of pounds. A large part of our bid for the second round of the levelling-up fund will go towards repairing those walls. Once they have been repaired, we can regenerate. Once we regenerate, the private sector will come in and do all of this, and then we will get the jobs and the investment that we desperately need.

I am not asking the Government on behalf of my constituents for multi-millions of pounds, nice though that would be; I am asking for targeted money at Weymouth—a seaside resort that like so many seaside resorts is struggling to cope. It is struggling because so

many people now go abroad for holidays. Flying abroad is so cheap and fewer people are going to resorts such as ours, beautiful though they are. We have lost the naval base, the Royal Naval air station, the ferry terminal and local government offices, so we need to replace those with other investments from private business.

I thank the Government for the Dorset enterprise zone, which is in Winfrith, not far from Wool. That has been a huge success. With the help of Government funding, we have now attracted some very big companies, including Atlas Elektronik, which is a huge company that deals with submarine warfare. The new BattleLab, which the Army has put in there, is generating huge amounts of business. Local small businesses work together with the Ministry of Defence to come up with solutions to problems, and it is proving a huge success.

We are asking for some targeted money, please, from the Government so that private enterprise will come and invest in South Dorset. My final point, in addition to the Government money, is to please not forget us. I think we have heard that from every speaker in the debate so far. Rural constituencies are so easy to forget because such a small number of people, in effect, live in them compared with all the urban and major metropolitan areas in this country. The Government tend to forget that the rural constituencies and rural areas are just as important and significant.

Rurality, as I am sure we will hear from my two Dorset colleagues, is not taken into account. Buses, if they exist, take longer. People are trapped in their homes. I think we heard from one Member about someone imprisoned in their home, because the bus came only once a week. That is not uncommon in Dorset or South Dorset. More connectivity and, as we heard from another Member, more joined-up thinking for rural communities are exactly what are needed.

I conclude on this point. I am aiming my comments in the main at the bid for the second round of the levelling-up fund. We were category 3, and we have now gone to category 2. I urge that, in the Government's mind, we need to be category 1. For all the reasons I have explained, we would be most grateful if when round 2 is announced we are definitely in it.

5.49 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), and I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on instigating this welcome debate. As several hon. Members have noted—I do not mean this as knocking copy—the only Labour voice that we will hear is from the Front Bench, although I have no doubt it will be able and articulate. I gently make the point to the Minister—hon. Members will recognise this—that Conservative Members and our party cannot forever take for granted the support of our rural communities. We need to pay back their support.

Levelling up is of course welcome, but it needs to be broken into digestible chunks. We need a set of levelling-up initiatives for post-industrial urban areas and a set that features the coastal areas that my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset mentioned and the rural areas that are clearly the kernel of the debate. I also strongly echo the *cri de coeur* of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon that it is time the Minister's

Department put in place regulations whereby town and parish councillors can be removed from office if they are not doing their job. I have a case in my constituency that is a perpetual headache and the council can do nothing about it.

As hon. Members have said, many people visiting rural areas across our country would be forgiven for thinking that all is well. We do have deprivation and need but it is not located in one area or ward, and because we cannot do that—we cannot take people to one place—it makes the delivery of improvements harder. We need some sort of rural tsar, or perhaps a rural squire might be better, to co-ordinate cross-Government rural proofing.

On the funding formula, this is not a rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul debate. It was Mr Blair's Government who took money away from the county shires and gave it to the urban areas. We need additional funds, a fairer formula or a rural proof formula to ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset gets the slice of chocolate cake that he desires; I must say that seed cake is my favourite and I would like a large slice. We need a review of the funding rubric and of the assessment of rural deprivation. We must strive for parity or equality—who could be against that? A child educated in my constituency requires as much money to be spent on their primary or secondary education as one in central Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham or Southampton, because education is a UK plc initiative.

I turn briefly to the Dorset Council area. Some 29.4% of its population is over 65, compared with 18.5% across England. One in 12 of the population are over 80 and that is due to increase by 10% by 2032. Being rural, as many hon. Members have mentioned, the cost of delivering services, such as school and care travel, is higher than in urban areas. Some 46% of its residents live in the most-deprived areas for access to services in England.

Despite all that, Dorset Council receives only £2.5 million a year in the rural services delivery grant. Some 85% of the council's expenditure is generated directly by council tax, compared with the average unitary authority, which has to find only 65%. It receives no revenue support grant where others get 4%. In 2019, the adult social care costs of hospital discharges were £4.1 million; this year, they are £15 million with no concomitant increase.

It is not just in local government that we need to take rurality more into account; the rubrics for the Environment Agency, road funding, the police and, as I have mentioned, schools also need to be refreshed. To take the Environment Agency, it is easy to make the business case stand up for spending £200,000 on a flood relief project that will benefit 10,000 people in the community. A scheme that has the same costs and delivers the same qualitative benefits for a community, albeit a much smaller or more sparsely populated and further flung one, however, will never pass the rubric assessment because it has been written in Whitehall by people who—dare I say?—have experience of living only in and around central London.

Many have mentioned that rural plc needs broadband and phone signal. We also need grid capacity. If anything is holding up development, it is the grid. It is a sad indictment that there is not a single consented business park in the Dorset Council area that could be fully developed out today, only because there is not capacity in the grid to provide electricity. Sturminster Newton in

my constituency would like some sustainable new housing, but it cannot be delivered because of an absence of electricity.

Finally, probably the thorniest issue—I do not touch on it now because I am in my last few seconds and no one can intervene—is access to workforce. I have already said that we have an older workforce. We have virtually zero unemployment in North Dorset; fortunately, that has been the case for many years. Will the Minister make sure that, when the Home Office is sculpting immigration policy, over which we perfectly properly have control in this place, it has a focus on the needs of the rural economy, to ensure that farming, innovation and the entrepreneurs of our rural areas can create investment, make jobs, pay into the Exchequer, create the opportunity of aspiration, and therefore level up rural Britain?

5.56 pm

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbours, my hon. Friends the Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax). I hope that the House will allow me to make some comments, although I am at risk of repeating what they said. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), whose quest to hold this important debate we all thoroughly backed.

It is clear to me that this House does not give enough time to debate and discuss the rural issues of the day. We have some important questions to ask ourselves. Why is levelling up not focused on rural areas in the same way it is on urban areas? Why does rural hardship not seem to matter in the same way as urban poverty? Why do rural jobs attract less pay than those in urban areas? Why does Transport for London get £1.7 billion of Government money to bail it out yet Dorset Council gets hardly anything—especially when we have the worst frequency rail line in the country? I just wanted to let the Minister know that.

I do not want the Treasury Green Book to prioritise rural areas; I want it to be fair to all parts of the United Kingdom, including rural Dorset. Why do sixth-formers—16 and 17-year-olds—in rural Dorset have to pay to get on the school bus, when those youngsters do not have to do so in urban areas? In certain pockets of West Dorset and, indeed, the wider Dorset area, social mobility is among the worst in the country. The real levelling up required in this country is in rural Britain, which is why I am so delighted to contribute to the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset clearly articulated some good statistics. I also have them in my speech—he has pinched them—but let me focus on a couple. It is totally unacceptable to me and my constituents—and, I think, to my constituency neighbours—that we have one of the highest council taxes in the country but zero revenue support grant, yet in places such as inner London there are boroughs with the lowest council tax in the country that receive some £24 million in revenue support grant.

**Simon Hoare:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have hanging over us the spectre of negative revenue support grant, whereby the Government might actually tell Dorset Council that it needs to pay some money back? Where that money would come from I have no idea. Does he agree that that would just add, for want of a better phrase, insult to injury?

**Chris Loder:** I wholly agree with my hon. Friend and want to relay that message to the Minister as well: I hope we do not get into the territory of negative RSG as there would be mass rebellions from the Dorset MPs if that were the case.

Covid was hugely damaging to the economy of West Dorset; we are not starting from a level playing field. I lost 18% of my businesses in West Dorset during the covid period: some 1,200 businesses shut. So we are already starting from a lower place, but it is very difficult to make the case on this because it feels as though we are always starting from behind the line.

My hon. Friends and constituency neighbours have talked about adult social care and I want to reiterate the point. Dorset County Hospital, in Dorchester in my constituency, is very challenged: to put the problem into perspective, the number of patients discharged into social care, at the expense of the council, has risen threefold over the last three years. The situation with police funding, fire funding and other areas is equally difficult, yet it is still hard to get any real understanding of that from the Government.

Huge reform is required in housing in rural areas. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon articulated very well in her speech some of the difficulties she faces with second homes and properties set aside often for full-time Airbnb lettings, and that has caused enormous difficulty in parts of West Dorset, too. Visitors could walk through some villages on a winter evening and almost think they are in a ghost town because so few properties are occupied. We cannot go on in that way and expect doctors, nurses, teachers and police officers to be able to live and work in the community.

We have gone on for too long without real action and progress in this area. Parts of rural Britain are being held economically hostage by unfair bureaucracies, and not just Government Departments. I have mentioned the Treasury Green Book and fairness between rural Britain and urban areas in the assessment of infrastructure investment, but I could also mention the Environment Agency, the Rural Payments Agency—I could keep going. Rural Britain finds the level of bureaucracy very difficult. That constrains our ability to make real economic progress and contribute to the wider economic growth of the country. I ask the Minister to take due note of that.

I understand that at next week's Prime Minister's questions I will have the opportunity to speak to the Prime Minister, and I tell the Minister in advance that I will ask the Prime Minister to set up a rural taskforce so that we do not need to continually share, in debates of this nature, the difficulties that we face. I want rural Britain to get turbocharged and to lead the way. We are very fortunate in rural Britain today: some of the most entrepreneurial, creative, innovative solutions are found in this country's rural areas. We need those solutions to help the wider country—indeed, some urban areas would do well to take them.

In addition to the rural taskforce that I will ask the Prime Minister to set up, the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset that there should be a rural tsar is well made. I hope the Minister will consider those points in winding up the debate.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Wind-ups will start no later than 26 minutes to 7, so the time limit for speeches is now six minutes.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the jazz odyssey that is three Dorset contributions on the bounce. May I take the House from the deep south up to rural Cumbria? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this vital debate. As we have heard, levelling up is not just about towns and cities; it has to include rural areas. Rural communities need support more than ever now; the cost of living crisis has become even more acute than when I raised the issue of levelling up rural Cumbria in an Adjournment debate a few months ago.

At the heart of the issue is the potential of our rural communities, which we can unlock if we level them up. The key theme is that rural areas are not London; Cumbria is not London. Their unique nature puts them on the front line of the cost of living crisis. We have spoken about people, households and businesses off grid. At home in Brampton I am on heating oil, and the £100 supplement does not even touch the sides, because people have to make minimum orders of sometimes 500 litres. I urge the Government to review that.

It is not just households that are off the grid but businesses as well. Hospitality and tourism are crucial to Cumbria and Penrith and the Border. I firmly believe that those businesses need the emergency support measures that this Government brought in during the pandemic. I am very pleased to be working with Eden District Council and supporting the levelling up bid for the Inspiring Eden Enterprise Hub near Penrith, which I hope the Government look at favourably.

As we have heard from many colleagues across the House, housing is pivotal for rural communities. That is very much the case in rural Cumbria; it is so important for families and young people to get homes and for those who work in agriculture, tourism and hospitality to be able to live in the areas where they work. We desperately need more accommodation in rural areas, and we need Government to look at amending planning processes to tackle the issue of second homes and short-term lets.

On agriculture, I am proud to stand up for our Cumbrian and British farmers, who are the best in the world and farm to the highest animal welfare standards. The agriculture sector is on the front line in the crisis of fuel, animal feed and fertiliser costs. We as a Government need to look favourably on our farmers who produce food for us, while also supporting our environment. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has been looking at that in its food security inquiry and, as we have heard, the ELMS transition inquiry. I firmly believe that the Government need to look at that, review the schemes and make sure that our hard-working farmers who produce fantastic food for us are supported.

We have heard much about connectivity. Transport links are vital in rural areas. We need to support railway development, such as the borders railway coming down through Longtown in my constituency and on to Carlisle, and reopen stations such as Gilsland. We need to improve the train services that come up to rural Cumbria. The Avanti West Coast service is in special measures now; it has been looked at and it has six months' notice. I firmly believe that we need strong action on that.



We have heard about ticket offices. We must protect our ticket offices in stations such as Penrith and Appleby. We have heard a lot about buses as well. In rural parts of the world, volunteer groups often step up where there are gaps in provision, such as the Fellrunner service or the Border Rambler service. I urge central Government to work with local government to use moneys sensibly. I urge Cumbria County Council to review its decision and the new unitary authorities to look at using central Government moneys to subsidise rural bus routes. That is an important point.

Hon. Members have spoken about education. It is so important that young people post 16 are able to get to their next place of training or education. I have been working with communities in Alston to help provide that. I urge the sensible use of central Government moneys. I hope that local government can put in provision. I want policy change that mandates local authorities to provide post-16 transport for our young people. Education is pivotal in my part of the world. We have fantastic schools. I urge central Government to look at rebuilding some of our important rural schools. Ullswater Community College in Penrith in the heart of my constituency is in need of a radical rebuild.

We have heard much about virtual connectivity, and Project Gigabit and the shared rural network are welcome. We have rays of light in Cumbria with B4RN—Broadband for the Rural North—providing services and working with the Government vouchers. We need to support communities to stay connected, we need to support our local radio stations and we need to support the terrestrial TV that people rely on. I firmly believe that we need to have policies made in London that reflect rural areas. We need to allow rural parish councils to meet virtually or in hybrid format so that local democracy can take place in areas where there are challenges. I firmly believe that rural areas need to be looked out for. Cumbria is not the same as London.

6.10 pm

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this debate. I know that much of what she spoke about is common in rural areas around the country, so I urge everybody to read her contribution in the first place. It is a pleasure to speak on a matter that is very important to many residents in Meon Valley. It is a constituency fringed on three sides by dense urban areas, but a lot of it is deeply rural. Because we are limited on time, I will focus on just two levelling-up issues.

The Minister will not be surprised that the first issue is public transport. Bus services in rural communities have proven very vulnerable to commercial pressures in the wake of covid. There are issues with higher business costs, and difficulties with recruiting and retaining drivers. Additionally, Hampshire County Council is facing enormous financial challenges, and this is affecting its ability to support the services that vulnerable people depend on. As others have mentioned, there is a lack of transport particularly for young people getting to school, but also getting to their Saturday jobs. For instance, going from Bishop's Waltham to Whiteley in my constituency is proving incredibly difficult. May I ask the Minister to look urgently at the support for transport

authorities such as Hampshire? Hampshire County Council is already doing as much as it can, but budgets have steadily reduced, and there is no more fat to trim or salami to slice.

The second priority, as others have mentioned, is broadband and telephone. I was pleased that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport intervened over the plans to cut off the existing public switched telephone network as part of the digital switchover, because like many of my constituents, I was concerned about proper safeguards for isolated households in the event of a power cut. May we ensure that we have a proper solution to these issues? I would like to give an assurance to my constituents well before any further move is made to switch off the PSTN.

However, I fully understand that the future is digital and wireless. I was delighted that the gigabit broadband scheme is enabling places such as Owslebury in my constituency to get up to speed. I know there is work going on with a scheme in Cheriton and a few other villages to help the residents there, too. It is another area where Hampshire County Council has provided brilliant support for residents through its broadband voucher scheme. However, there are still some remaining pockets of very slow speed in Meon Valley, and I hope the procurement that DCMS is engaged in at present can quickly bring all the benefits of better broadband to them.

I welcome everything that has been done so far. However, we are going to need to fill the gaps in 4G mobile phone coverage, as well as to roll out 5G as far as possible into rural areas such as mine. We must support our rural communities, especially our farms. Farming is increasingly a high-tech, data-driven business, and farms need better broadband connections and good mobile coverage to make the most of such opportunities. There are also small businesses, some of which in my constituency are world class, that are dotted around the constituency, and they would benefit from fast broadband. I hope the Minister will prioritise those as well.

If we are truly to level up those who live in rural areas, we need to make sure that they have access to transport and broadband technology. If we do not, we run the risk that these areas will be left behind. As others have said, many people think of the countryside as an idyll, but there are pockets of deprivation that are just as serious as those in inner cities. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) mentioned, they are just not as obvious or as big. Any Government policy regarding levelling up in rural areas must have this reality front and centre if it is to be successful.

6.14 pm

**Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on successfully bringing the debate and her excellent speech. There is no doubt that the Government are delivering for rural communities, including £5 billion for Project Gigabit and the £1 billion shared rural network deal with mobile operators, and my constituency—beautiful Hastings and Rye—has benefited from those investments. However, there is more to do.

The productivity rate in rural areas has fallen behind the England average. Digital connectivity remains worse than in urban areas. Rural public transport is bitty and

[Sally-Ann Hart]

expensive to run, impacting on residents' access to education or work—and even GP and NHS services. Median earnings are lower for those working in rural areas, and house prices tend to be more expensive than their urban counterparts relative to local earnings. Poverty is also more dispersed—it is hidden among the better off—making it more difficult to identify and tackle, especially as regards fuel poverty.

Research commissioned in 2021 by the Rural Services Network showed that wages are lower in the countryside, but that many living costs—fuel, travel and heating costs—are higher. It is also more expensive for local authorities to provide statutory services due to geography, demographics and density of population. Local authority funding formulas do need to be reconsidered.

It is not just about targeting more money to rural communities. Financial constraints are an issue globally, so we need to be much cannier about how taxpayers' money is spent. Less must go further. Much more can be achieved if local authorities work with local enterprise partnerships, the voluntary or civic sector, local businesses and local colleges and schools. Partnership working across our social infrastructure rather than working in silos prevents the doubling or quadrupling of efforts and resources. Communities can drive levelling up.

Rural and coastal areas have many similarities as regards levelling up. The “Levelling Up” White Paper followed the inquiry into rural health and care, which launched on 1 February and highlighted the significant problems experienced by many rural communities in accessing health and social care services and the factors that contribute to them, which range from poor digital connectivity to a lack of public transport services and lack of affordable rural housing. In the same way, the chief medical officer's report on health disparities in coastal communities highlighted similar underlying issues. It is the underlying factors of poverty and deprivation that need to be sorted out, especially housing, education, skills and connectivity, including transport. I echo hon. Members' calls on bus services.

Affordable housing for residents who live and work locally is vital in rural areas, including more homes for social rent. The levelling up of rural areas economically and socially will not happen without addressing the housing issues, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon highlighted.

The tourism and hospitality sector plays an important role in rural communities. Tourism is vital, but it adds to pressure on local authorities and police services. For example, in beautiful Hastings and Rye, we see thousands of people arrive at Camber Sands in the summer months and Rother District Council needs extra resources to deal with the extra rubbish collections and security guards needed. Sussex police also need extra resources to deal with what is in effect a Wembley-sized football match about 15 times a year in the summer months. The all-party parliamentary group for the south-east recently produced a report on levelling up the south-east, with one recommendation being that local authorities should be able to raise, for example, a local tourism tax. We should consider that carefully to help local authorities to pay for those extra services so that the cost does not fall on local council tax payers.

Reducing hospitality VAT would help lower prices and protect businesses, especially in coastal communities such as Hastings and Rye. In the last Budget, the Government reduced VAT on draught beer and cider. Following discussions with many of my local hospitality businesses, I ask the Government to consider further the impact of VAT not only on pubs but on restaurants. Reducing VAT back to 5% or even 12.5%, as they did during the pandemic, would be really helpful. Many businesses are struggling with increases in energy costs and supply chains, and they cannot pass the costs on to their customers. If they do not have customers, there will be no pubs or restaurants and jobs will be lost. But levelling up is not just about solving problems. It is about finding solutions and opportunities, and rural Britain has so much potential to unleash if given the opportunity to do so. Rural levelling up is an economic, environmental and social opportunity which will benefit the whole of the UK. Our rural areas possess a wealth of natural capital which can underpin rural levelling up. Nature-based solutions to climate change can make the most of this, as well as farmland providing our food.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised the huge potential for environmental services to drive rural levelling up, noting that rural areas account for the majority—74%—of the UK's £1.2 billion natural capital. The rural business and the rural powerhouse all-party parliamentary group highlighted the potential for natural capital markets to help level up rural areas, such as payments for carbon, biodiversity and food projects. If wetlands, peat, trees and soil are restored, maintained and protected, they can help to boost our rural economies by providing jobs, food, eco-tourism, leisure and health benefits, as well as protection against flooding. Investing in restoration and adaptation projects offers opportunities for low-income rural communities that yield financial returns on investments, create jobs, stimulate local economies, and regenerate and revitalise the health of ecosystems.

6.20 pm

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this important debate for rural communities across our whole United Kingdom, not least the 335 square miles of rural north Buckinghamshire that I have the privilege of representing in this place.

I associate myself with the points multiple hon. Members made to quash the myth that rural communities are all universally wealthy without pockets of deprivation. In my constituency, there are certainly communities that are struggling and need support. The energy crisis has really highlighted that, following on from the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) made about off-grid households. It took until September for Whitehall to acknowledge that off grid existed. The £100 scheme is too universal and does not address the real fuel poverty that exists in off-grid households, not least those that are not on oil and do not have the space to have a liquefied petroleum gas tank but are on the 47 kg LPG bottles, which I believe are up to something like £88 plus VAT a bottle now and, on full burn, only last for 19 hours. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take that point back to the

Treasury, because if we do not get the basics right for rural communities it is very difficult to level up rural communities and deliver for everyone.

I was struck by the figures my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) gave that rural communities receive for their public services 37% less than their urban counterparts. Clearly, that is not right and we absolutely need to address it to ensure that every community across our United Kingdom gets, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) said, their fair slice of the cake. For communities like mine, when it comes to public services it is not just the core funding that is a challenge. It is also the way we remunerate the expenses of some of the lowest paid but most vital and important public servants. Carers often have to go in their own cars to visit patients and those they are caring for. Often, they do not even get the 45p a mile set out by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which, as we all know with rising prices at the fuel pumps, does not actually cover costs in the first place. That needs to be addressed urgently.

For my constituency, there is something that needs to be tackled very, very urgently: projects that are done in the name of levelling up, but do anything but level up north Buckinghamshire. I have two railways being built through my constituency. One is HS2. It is totally toxic—a destroyer of farms, countryside and our very way of life—and I have spoken in total opposition to it many times in this House. The other is East West Rail. While we welcome that railway, which will bring vital connectivity, those responsible have made, if I may put it in such a way, a bit of a hash of building it.

The unintended consequences need to be resolved through cross-governmental work to ensure that where big infrastructure projects are being built, whether they are welcome or not, they are not allowed to disrupt the day-to-day lives of communities. Only this morning, for example, I learned that the Crooked Billet pub in Newton Longville has closed its doors for the last time and is being handed back to the brewery, because the endless road closures from East West Rail have starved them of their trade. When the Addison Road bridge in Steeple Claydon was closed for months on end earlier this year, the Prince of Wales pub's takings were £2,000 a week down. That is a devastating amount for a rural village pub to lose. There was no compensation—nothing whatever. W. G. Hill & Son just outside Marsh Gibbon has effectively been shut down by East West Rail replacing a bridge next to that business, as it cannot now legally get its HGVs underneath the bridge.

All those businesses have essentially been allowed to fail in the name of levelling-up projects. I urge the Minister to look at that very carefully to ensure that, in the future when infrastructure projects are built, we do not allow communities and businesses to suffer in that way—not to mention the state of our roads, which have literally been ripped up by the sheer volume of HGV movements around the large infrastructure projects. Buckinghamshire Council is doing its best; it has a £100 million programme to resurface roads across the county. However, when others are doing the damage, it is not fair that council tax payers have to pick up the bill.

I welcome the infrastructure first moves that the Government are introducing, but there needs to be some retrospective action on GP access in my constituency.

Long Crendon lost its surgery last year. It secured land through a development, but it desperately needs the funds to build the new surgery; that needs attention. Likewise, on the Kingsbrook development just to the east of Aylesbury, the integrated care board is trying to claw back the section 106 money to spend it on other surgeries. I urge the Minister to take urgent action to ensure that infrastructure first can be retrospective, too.

6.26 pm

**Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con):** It is always very good to be called last in debates because it means that I get to listen to everybody else's speeches. I have enjoyed the debate enormously and it has been very edifying, particularly to listen to everybody boasting about how big and beautiful their constituency is. My Devizes constituency is as big and beautiful as any, but more importantly, I suggest that it is the oldest place in England—[*Interruption.*] My goodness me, 1066—in my part of Wiltshire, we were trading in the fourth millennium BC, as evidenced by recently discovered archaeology. In Amesbury near Stonehenge, there was the discovery of the body of an archer, who—carbon dating and testing demonstrates—came from somewhere in central Europe in about 2000 BC. They obviously had some freedom of movement arrangements, which some disapprove of. It did not turn out well for the Amesbury archer, who died near Salisbury.

I mention that because we have been an economic entrepôt since the dawn of time. Through the middle ages in particular, my part of Wiltshire was incredibly prosperous. The great wave of prosperity arose from the wool trade, particularly, and then by about 1800, when the town of Devizes was a very important centre of the wool trade, it started slowly to decline as industrialisation happened, as the Kennet and Avon canal that comes through the town was dug and as Brunel was building his railway out to Bristol. Those amazing industrial innovations were actually the harbinger of the economic decline of our area, as people moved from the land into the cities. However, even through the 19th century, all sorts of important innovations and technological developments happened in our area. I pay particular tribute to one of my favourite local firms, the agricultural engineers T. H. White, which has been going since 1832 and has a £100 million turnover. It is still based in Devizes and is still a family firm, employing people all over the country and, indeed, the world. I have seen some of its amazing agricultural machines in use in our area.

Places left behind by industrialisation are becoming viable again. Our rural economies are becoming viable and thriving. Brilliant companies are hidden up almost every farm track and in every little backwater. In all our towns and industrial estates, there are brilliant, modern, high-tech firms such as Varivane, which makes kit for the Royal Navy. Most of our frigates have been kitted out by this little firm on an industrial estate in Devizes.

The other day, I visited a firm just outside Marlborough called Design 360, which makes amazing writing. It is run by a man who noticed when he was growing up in the area that everything seemed to be made in China. He said, "Why does everything have to be made in China?" and dedicated himself to developing a business in Wiltshire that makes the best possible kit at good prices and employs local people.



[*Danny Kruger*]

We have all sorts of other amazing industries, particularly in the agritech space. We have artificial intelligence that can monitor a multitude of crops in a field, so we can get away from the monoculture model of farming and have a variety of crops being grown in the same place. The health of millions of plants is being monitored through AI. We have vertical farming industries and are developing proteins that can be a massive British export and feed the urban populations of the world.

It is not all high tech. We should not think of the rural economy of the future as being all about whizzy new technologies. Actually, the future could and should look much like the past. I particularly want to see a revival of local food processing. That should be one of our great ambitions in this space, because it feels all wrong that farmers have to send their produce miles away for processing. It disappears into other regions of the country, and if it comes back to Wiltshire at all, it is packaged by some other firm. Why should we not have shorter food journeys and good local processing, as other countries do?

I totally endorse everything that has been said about the importance of food security and about the opportunity that environmental land management schemes bring to enhance the production of food as part of our public goods regime. There is no conflict between supporting the environment and supporting growth, but we need to recognise that the production of food is farmers' primary objective. I would say that food security is more important than enhancing global trade, so I would prioritise it over trade deals.

How can we help? I agree with everything that has been said about the importance of support with energy and about VAT and rates relief, particularly for pubs and brewers. I want to mention a few other things quickly, beginning with skills. We export too many young people. We have a culture of higher education; we should invest more in further education. Wiltshire College is a brilliant local institution. I would like to see more support there.

I echo everything that has been said about housing. We need more housing in our local villages. We should say no to the five-year land supply rule; every village should be able to build more houses without having to use that rule.

I turn to connectivity. We need more broadband. Thankfully, I am confident that we will get a railway station in Devizes. I agree about demand-responsive buses. We must say no to HGVs. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith): we have to improve the situation.

Lastly, I turn to planning. I must mention a brilliant firm, Poulton Technologies, which is run by the Coplestone family. They want to build an amazing factory to create undersea technology for fixing pipes, but they cannot do it here. They are having to do it in Saudi Arabia, because the planning system does not allow the space in the UK. That is what we need.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We now come to the wind-ups.

6.33 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to sum up for the Scottish National party. It has been a fine debate and an important one, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing it, but I have to say that I do not know where to start in summing it up. Hon. Members actually still believe that something called levelling up is going on across the United Kingdom and that it will somehow be part of the rural economy. They still believe that there is some sort of agenda that will pour vast sums of money into some of the most under-resourced regions and sectors across the UK, without even more being taken out.

I suppose levelling up is a little like the emperor's new clothes, but with the emperor starting the whole process entirely naked. At best, it is pork barrel politics at its most gratuitous. In fact, it gives porcine containers a bad name. How dare this Government talk about levelling up when the latest House of Commons Library figures that I found this morning show that benefit claimants in Scotland have seen their income slashed by 16% as a result of a decade of Tory austerity?

It is not levelling up that is going on across the whole United Kingdom. In fact, it is levelling down—a razing to the ground of the living standards of everybody across this country. We are now entering austerity 2.0, with cuts in budgets, and poverty and inequality growing. We can only really laugh at the suggestion of levelling up, while feeling grossly insulted by this fiction on behalf of our constituents.

One word is missing from this whole debate. I do not know whether Members know what it is, but I will give them a clue: it begins with “Brex” and ends with “it”. While levelling up may be a fiction in terms of how it is applied to the rural economy, Brexit most definitely is not: Brexit is having an impact on every single rural constituency in the United Kingdom. This disastrous hard Brexit has hammered rural Britain, costing it millions of pounds, causing exports to plunge, and imposing labour shortages on every business in the rural economy. We cannot get people to work in our hospitality businesses because of what the Tories have done to freedom of movement. This is causing real difficulty and damage, and causing good rural businesses to close down. And the fact is that it will only get worse. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that only two fifths of the Brexit damage has been inflicted so far, and that every person in the United Kingdom will face a bill of about £1,200 because of what the Tories have done.

Instead of perpetuating the myth of levelling up, let us look at the real issues facing our countryside. I am disappointed that the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), is not here at the moment, because we heard from the National Farmers Union yesterday that the real issue is the cost of fertilisers and energy costs and the difficulty that those are causing. I have listened today to Members representing constituencies in counties such as Dorset, Shropshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and Sussex. I do not presume that those are the most deprived parts of the United Kingdom. I represent a prosperous area in Perthshire. I have pockets of deprivation,

but for all these Tories to come here today asking for more money for their communities, when people in rural constituencies are suffering so much—

**Selaine Saxby:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Pete Wishart:** I cannot; I have no time.

Let us look at where this largesse is going. I do not know whether anyone is surprised by this, but of the 49 council areas in England that were considered to be the most developed but are now priority places, no fewer than 35 are represented by Conservative MPs, or a majority of Conservative MPs. Finally, let us look at how this will affect Scotland. Levelling up is not about levelling up when it comes to Scotland; it is about taking powers away from the Scottish Government. Under the EU structural funding system, the Scottish Government, together with the European Union and local authorities, designed projects that now depend on the whim of Whitehall.

Levelling up is an utter myth in these days of austerity and the Tory cost of living crisis, and the sooner the Tories get the message about that, the better we shall all be.

6.37 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to wind up this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing it, and on the characteristic power with which she spoke. I think it important to say at the outset—and this has been a theme of the debate—that levelling up must never be north versus south, or London versus the rest of the country. There is a clear need to tackle inequalities across all our nations and regions and to recognise that, as in rural communities, they can manifest themselves in many different ways, and it is good that we have had a chance to discuss that today.

The points that the hon. Lady made about productivity, especially in relation to connectivity, were very well made, and were echoed by the hon. Members for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). Her points about holiday lets—which I will cover shortly—were echoed by the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). There were many other interesting contributions. Treasury reform, which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), and by all three of the Members from Dorset, is an important issue. The reason levelling up has failed so far is that it has met the Treasury, and the Treasury—in the person of the now Prime Minister—has rejected it. I fear that that may portend the future of levelling up.

**Miriam Cates:** I thank the hon. Member for his kind words about the speeches made by many of my colleagues. He may remember, however, that when the present Prime Minister was Chancellor, he granted a number of levelling-up fund town deals. All these levelling-up funds have already had a significant impact in the constituencies of Members on both sides of the House.

**Alex Norris:** I have news for the hon. Lady. If we add all these funds together—high street funds and brownfield funds, for instance—we see that all but four of the

150 upper-tier local authorities are worse off because of the cuts that have been made to the council. So the reality is that even the winners have been losers so far. If what we are getting is more of the same, we will regret it—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady can shake her head, but it is true.

To move on to a couple of points of my own, we have seen the weakening of the foundations of our rural communities through unaffordable housing for younger generations, cuts to transport funding, GPs and dentists stretched to breaking point and community hubs such as village shops, post offices and pubs closing. These issues have plagued rural areas. In many ways, they reflect the problems being faced across the country, but the impact is more harshly felt in our rural towns and villages because, if they lose their cash machine and it is the only cash machine, for example, that has a very significant impact.

The net result is that young people have had to get out to get on, moving far away from their homes and loved ones to find decent opportunities. They take their spending power away from the towns and villages, which costs us our high streets, pubs, banks and post offices—the social fabric that binds us. That has left people growing old hundreds of miles away from their children and grandchildren, and they are feeling the aftershocks in every part of their life: declining prosperity, an eroded sense of community and a growing sense of insecurity.

The evidence is clear that we need a levelling-up settlement that works for rural Britain. We know that 50% of the rural population live in areas that have the poorest accessibility to services based on minimum travel times, compared with just 2% of the urban population. The average weekly household expenditure on transport costs in rural areas is £114, compared with £76 in urban areas. As the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) and the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) said, median workplace earnings are £2,500 a year lower in rural areas than in urban areas.

The case for change is strong, and we on these Benches argue that the problem has been a model that has involved flying the aeroplane on one engine; we have backed one small part of this country and not invested enough in our communities across the country to build thriving cities, towns, villages and coastal communities so that they can all reach their potential. That important point was made by the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) with regard to coastal communities.

I know that time is short, and I am keen to hear the Minister's response, so I am going to make three suggestions that we believe would make a significant difference to rural communities and provide a bit of an alternative between us and the Government. First, we have pledged the introduction of a licensing system for holiday lets—along the lines of what we are already doing in Wales—in coastal and rural communities, so that we can protect communities' local character but still allow them to reap the rewards of thriving tourism. A stronger licensing system will allow genuine holiday lets to be identified while ending the injustice of young people being priced out of their own neighbourhoods, only for those homes to stand empty for months on end.

[Alex Norris]

The hon. Members for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) made points about transport in rural communities, and we know that the loss of bus services has affected rural communities particularly hard. Our second proposal is to prioritise addressing the rural transport crisis by ensuring that councils can improve bus services by regulating and taking public ownership of bus networks while also extending the powers to re-regulate local bus services to all areas that want them, not just to combined authorities with elected Mayors. Having heard what the hon. Member for North Devon said about elected Mayors at the beginning, I am hoping that that will be music to her ears.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I happened to be shadow Transport Secretary when the great John Prescott was Secretary of State for Transport, Environment and the Regions. He said that he was going to do all sorts of things to revive rural buses, but rural bus services still went into decline. Can the hon. Gentleman not move forward and think about the community bus services and the digitised hopper mobile bus services? We need to completely rethink rural transport, and going back to regulated bus services is not the future of bus services in rural areas.

**Alex Norris:** We have a point of difference on that. Yes, those models and that creativity in local communities is an important aspect of this, as are enhancements in technology, but I think that local oversight and control to ensure that there is full coverage would enhance services, rather than leaving them to the market as we have done.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** It did not work before.

**Alex Norris:** The hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for the status quo, but frankly the status quo does not work.

Finally, we will put local people back in charge with a new community right to buy, giving communities the opportunity to take control of pubs, historic buildings and football clubs that come up for sale or fall into disrepair. At the moment, local groups have a right to bid for such assets but it is clear that that has not worked. We will augment that to ensure that communities can make the most of the new right by improving the community ownership fund to ensure that seed capital is available for communities to generate revenues so that they can invest in their town, village or city and ensure that the proceeds of growth benefit those who live there. These are meaningful interventions that will have a meaningful impact on our rural communities. This lies in stark contrast to the Government's levelling-up plans, which are so inconsequential that Ministers will not even release the impact assessment.

Again, I appeal to Conservative Back Benchers, many of whom I know to be independent-minded people who believe in the importance of doing things right in this place. The impact assessment on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill has been ready since July, but the Government will not release it. We have had all the Bill's stages up to the end of Committee without the impact assessment. If we are serious about levelling-up rural Britain, let us have a conversation on the facts. My efforts to get the Minister to change his position on releasing

the impact assessment have not worked. I ask Conservative Back Benchers to help, because we need a proper conversation on the facts.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech from what I have heard.

We are losing pubs and shops in our rural areas. We have a fantastic community shop in the village of Barford and a community pub in Norton Lindsey, and they bring their communities together. When I saw the title of this debate, I was concerned it was about the prospect of Barford being literally levelled for a quarry—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. That is a long intervention. The hon. Gentleman may have been here earlier in the debate, but he certainly has not been here since I came into the Chair at half-past 5, so he is rather naughty.

**Alex Norris:** I agree with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said, and it is why a community right to buy would add to the tools that enable communities to shape their future.

I understand the cynicism on the SNP Benches, but tackling regional inequality should be a national priority. People in our rural communities need to know that this place is delivering meaningful change across all our nations and regions. I do not think that case can be made at the moment, as is clear from the debate. They deserve better. We have made a series of suggestions, and I hope the Minister is minded to address them and the other points raised in this debate.

6.46 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), as all my colleagues have, on securing this debate, given the importance and the salience of the issues that she and all colleagues have highlighted.

We have had a good debate that shows the breadth and depth of the discussion and the importance of levelling up to so many colleagues across the country. We have had contributions from the middle of Scotland all the way down to the bottom of the south-west, which demonstrates the importance of this subject to so many people and communities across the country.

The Government agree, and in February—I was not in the Department at the time—we published the levelling-up White Paper, the common consensus on which is that it is one of the deepest and most profound analyses of the challenges of improving communities across the country. The White Paper has been welcomed by most independent commentators as a serious piece of work on which serious policy can be and is being delivered for the long-term good of all our communities.

The White Paper's central thesis accepts that talent is distributed equally across the communities of all hon. Members who have spoken today, and beyond, but that opportunity is not necessarily equally distributed. It is the role of Government to seek to rebalance that distribution reasonably and proportionately to offer opportunity, prosperity and pride across all communities.



We have been clear that change will not come overnight. This is a long-term issue that has been at the fore for many Governments, of all rosette colours, over many decades. The point of the levelling-up White Paper, and of all the work done before, during and after it, is to show that the Government are absolutely serious about making progress. The contributions of my hon. Friends demonstrate the seriousness of the work already being done on levelling up not only in rural communities but elsewhere. We will remain committed to that work. Within that paper, for rural communities and for others, we have committed by 2030 to improve living standards, research and development in all regions, transport infrastructure, digital connectivity, education and skills, health, wellbeing, pride in place—this is about the vital importance people place on and the attachment people feel to their communities—and housing, and to reduce crime and ensure there are devolution opportunities. So many of my colleagues have referred to that and it is so important.

This debate is also important to me as a representative of a semi-rural constituency. I understand many of the issues and the points highlighted by colleagues because I have the pleasure and privilege of representing so many colleagues in rural areas. The beauty that those areas offer and the challenges they face have been articulated by colleagues from across the House in the past few hours. I represent part of a national park, 41 different towns, villages and hamlets, and dozens of parish councils, so I understand the challenges and opportunities that rural areas offer—so many colleagues have articulated those so well. Let me continue my five-and-a-half-year quest to read into the *Hansard* record the names of all of my towns, villages and hamlets by saying that only on Saturday I visited the hamlet of Wigley, which has one of the smallest schools in Derbyshire, if not in the whole of the UK. It has just been successful, thanks to the headteacher and all the staff, in opening some additional space that will allow it to increase the number of pupils it supports every year going forward. I congratulate it on that.

This demonstrates that we must talk about levelling up not just in the traditional areas where there has been more discussion about it—places such as North East Derbyshire or areas northward—but, as has been highlighted by colleagues, in every part of the country. We need to have this discussion in rural areas, semi-rural areas and elsewhere, because there will be pockets of deprivation in every part of our communities and it is vital that we try to resolve, improve and mitigate those.

I could not disagree more profoundly with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) when he seemed to be indicating that simply because colleagues come from an affluent geography they are unable to make any statements about this whatsoever. That could not be more wrong, and it shows a complete misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the distribution of the challenges in the UK. It also shows a lack of understanding of what the UK Government are trying to do through their levelling-up initiatives—this is something that the Scottish National party has failed to do repeatedly while it has been in government since 2007.

**Simon Hoare:** Will the Minister also confirm that nobody on our side of the House urged that we should be robbing Peter to pay Paul? It was not a question of

taking money away from urban and giving it to rural areas; it was a *cri de coeur* for potentially more money or a more equitable and rurally sensitive funding rubric. It was not about taking money away; the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has raised a most frightful slur.

**Lee Rowley:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. What he said demonstrates the level of nuance and depth of the debate on our side of the House and the frankly cartoonish response put forward by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I hope the Minister will also agree that the real problem with the Scottish nationalist party is that it does not want the British Government to have any relationship with the Scottish citizen and that the ability of the British Government to assist in levelling up in Scotland is why they have such resentment on this. It is because there are many people in Scotland who voted to be British citizens in the referendum, which we won and the SNP lost.

**Lee Rowley:** My hon. Friend makes a strong point.

I have only three and a half minutes left, so I will try to address a number of the points that have been highlighted by colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), along with my hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Robert Courts), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) and for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), among others, raised the point about connectivity, be it of the physical kind, in terms of buses and public transport, or the virtual kind, in terms of broadband. They are absolutely right to advocate on the challenges that this brings. We all know that there have been challenges associated with buses in the past few years. When the level of decrease of passenger use is so profound as it has been with covid, of course we want to try to work through how we can support rural communities. That is no different in my constituency. We have to try to look at the innovative solutions that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch highlighted with regards to a demand response to travel, while also ensuring that people have good quality bus services over the long term.

I had the pleasure of discussing many of these things with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), along with the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—the representative of that rural idyll—during the Committee stage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale made some strong points about the importance of skills, which is the subject of one of the missions in our White Paper, demonstrating our commitment to that and highlighting the importance of trying to make progress on public transport connectivity and accessibility.

**Tim Farron:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Lee Rowley:** Sadly, I will not as I have further points to cover.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) mentioned funding formulas. Although I am only 10 days into the job, I am very happy to talk

[*Lee Rowley*]

to more colleagues about local government finance in general. I am keen to understand, to learn and to take the expertise that the all-party group and others have demonstrated over so many years to assist me in my role in the months ahead. He is absolutely right to raise the issue of park homes, as it is so important to many of us with rural and semi-rural constituencies.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) highlighted the importance of trying to get some of these points right both in terms of application processes to make applications for improvements and of making sure that central Government evaluate those in a way that works. His points on that were very strong. The triple tag team of my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset (Richard Drax), for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and for West Dorset (Chris Loder) made some very good points about the importance of enabling the input of the private sector, about ensuring that we have parish and town councils that work for the communities that they serve and also about negative revenue support grant. I have heard all of those points and would be happy to talk to my colleagues about them. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who is an important and doughty campaigner, made a strong point about trains in his area, particularly about the Avanti Service.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Buckingham (Greg Smith), and for Devizes (Danny Kruger) demonstrated the importance of tourism and hospitality and the importance of consideration of communities when large infrastructure projects take place in local areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes highlighted the immense importance from a rural perspective of remembering the long-term history and the reasons why these communities have developed in the way they have. As he said, the recollection and the acknowledgement of that history is so important in helping us to understand how we develop policy in the future.

In the moment that I have left, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions today. It has been an incredibly interesting and important debate, which demonstrates our ability to have a nuanced, detailed and open conversation about the challenges and opportunities that face our rural communities. By doing that, we have the opportunity to make progress in the long-term to support these communities as we develop in the decades ahead.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Selaine Saxby for her final words.

6.57 pm

**Selaine Saxby:** I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon, the Minister for his ongoing engagement with me in this role and in his previous roles and for listening to me about my rural issues, and the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating this important debate.

It seems bewildering that the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), still cannot grasp the concept of pockets of

deprivation. As a former maths teacher, I can tell him that he clearly needs a lesson in averages and variants. Indeed, many of the innovative solutions suggested by my Conservative colleagues cost nothing at all. As we look to lift up our communities, the SNP policies and rhetoric look to drag theirs down.

I very much hope that word will reach the Chancellor about this afternoon's debate ahead of next week's autumn statement and that our rural councils will receive the funds needed to continue to deliver vital services, which, quite simply, cost more in rural Britain.

As the number of Conservative colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon demonstrates, we are quite clearly the party of rural Britain. I hope that under our new Prime Minister and our new ministerial teams we will work harder, faster and smarter cross-Department to level up rural Britain.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of levelling up rural Britain.

## Business without Debate

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (14 NOVEMBER)

*Ordered,*

That at the sitting on 14 November, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on

(1) the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the Australia and New Zealand Trade Deals not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that motion, and

(2) the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the situation in Ukraine not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, or six hours after the commencement of the proceedings relating to the Australia and New Zealand Trade Deals, whichever is the later;

proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

### PETITION

#### Planned closure of Sedbergh's Royal Mail delivery office

7 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition in the name of 1,027 of my Westmorland and Lonsdale constituents. They are deeply concerned, as am I, that Royal Mail is proposing to close the Sedbergh delivery office in Sedbergh. Not only is that a serious problem and a loss of service to that part of the dales, but it undermines the financial package that makes sure that Sedbergh post office can survive and thrive. The closure of Sedbergh post office would lead to the outreach services at Barbon, Endmoor and Dent also closing.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge Royal Mail to stop their plans to close Sedbergh Delivery Office.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale,*

*Declares that Royal Mail have announced they are proposing to close Sedbergh Delivery Office and this move will risk making Sedbergh Post Office unsustainable and therefore risk closing the outreach Post Offices at Dent, Barbon and Endmoor.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge Royal Mail to stop their plans to close Sedbergh Delivery Office.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P002781]

## Bathing Water Status: Rivers

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

7.1 pm

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I am delighted to have been successful in securing this debate to cover such an important subject, and it is very good to see my hon. Friend the Minister in her place at the Dispatch Box. She has led many Government initiatives on improving our environment, which of course I strongly support.

There are many elements to the work to improve our water quality, but I am only going to focus on one specific element in this debate. As colleagues will have seen from the title of the debate, I want to see more rivers achieving bathing water quality status. Specifically, I want the River Nidd at the Lido Leisure Park in Knaresborough to achieve bathing water status. Even more specifically, that is a pinpoint location rather than a stretch of river, because that is the process we have to engage in.

My hon. Friend the Minister is a knowledgeable and well-travelled lady, but I should detail for the House a bit more about the Nidd. It is a tributary of the Ouse, rising in the high dales on Great Whernside and flowing down through Nidderdale, skirting Harrogate and going through Knaresborough before joining the Ouse. The upper section is in the Nidderdale area of outstanding natural beauty, then the Nidd gorge, and when it reaches Knaresborough it forms part of one of the most famous Yorkshire views. I cannot distribute pictures, but I ask hon. Members to imagine a castle on a crag, a viaduct over the gorge and homes cascading down the valley side—Knaresborough is a very beautiful town.

Just downstream from that famous viewpoint is the lido, a leisure home site owned and run by Meridian Parks and the Maguire family. It is also a popular location for wild swimming. Of course the issue of water quality is not confined to one area, and while we have many designated bathing areas around our coast, there are very few inland areas and those few are overwhelmingly lakes, not rivers. Indeed, looking at the data from the Outdoor Swimming Society, 98% of areas with bathing water status are coastal.

There is one river in our area of Yorkshire that has achieved that status, and it is the River Wharfe in Ilkley. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) in his place, and I know he intends to say a few words and share some insights from his excellent work there. The purpose of seeking this debate was to highlight that many more rivers must be awarded bathing water status right across our country and to promote our campaign for the River Nidd in Knaresborough.

**Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): Inadvertently or not, my hon. Friend is making almost precisely the points that the Environmental Audit Committee made in its inquiry into water quality in rivers: that bathing water quality status should be an objective of every water company over the next pricing period, so that we can radically improve the quality of our rivers and allow more people to take great pleasure from swimming in all weathers in more and more rivers around the country.



**Andrew Jones:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I have to say that I had not picked up all the output of his Select Committee, so apologies for that, but I strongly agree with everything he has said this evening. He is right that it should be an objective, but to achieve that objective, a team approach is needed, and one that involves the local community, local businesses, Government agencies, local government and national Government.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. I spoke with him before in the Tea Room, so he sort of knows what I am going to ask, and I am sure he is well prepared for it. To achieve bathing water status, it needs the efforts and the input of councils for a start, as well as that of local communities. It also means that the local councils and agencies should look at safe swimming in rivers. It is important that if the waters are right, they have to be safe for swimming. Does he feel that there should be legitimate signage and information posts to make strictly clear that if there is no information, individuals should not swim in any section of that river? It is about the quality of the rivers, but it is also about the safety.

**Andrew Jones:** Well, it would not be an Adjournment debate if the hon. Member did not intervene. These things should become proprietorially known as “Shannon moments”. I obviously agree with his point that water safety is critical, but also his point about informing people about where it is safe and not safe. There is a role for local government in signage. I certainly agree with him.

I have met Nidd catchment anglers, the owners of the lido, residents and businesses, and they are all on board with the proposal for the Knaresborough site. So how do we reach that important water quality standard? The answer is to improve the actions and inputs on water quality from so many stakeholders.

One key concern for river water quality is the Victorian design of our sewerage system. This system mixes foul water—sewage—and rainwater run-off in the same sewer system. Combined sewer overflows were installed to enable sewers to cope with the additional volume during periods of heavy rain. That enabled the sewers to discharge into rivers. If the CSOs did not exist, it would back up into our homes when the system is overloaded, and that would be worse, but we have seen them operating more frequently due to increasing population and in particular due to changing weather patterns, with more intense rainfall.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for letting me intervene on him. He speaks with total passion on this issue, and it is a passion that West Oxfordshire feels, too, about the Evenlode and the Windrush, which we have. He is right that this challenge must be overcome with a team effort, but does he agree that sooner or later the Victorian infrastructure he has spoken about will need to be upgraded and water companies' investment will be key to that?

**Andrew Jones:** My hon. Friend is as wise as ever. It happens to know the Windrush a little bit, and it is a very beautiful part of our country. He is most fortunate to have it in his constituency. While it is a team effort, it

will have to be backed by investment. It is one of a number of policy areas where our requirement for infrastructure has not kept pace with modern demands, so he is absolutely correct, and I do agree with him.

One area where we have seen significant progress is with the increased monitoring of CSOs, and that has contributed to greater awareness of the number of discharges. In 2016, only 5% were monitored—next year it will be 100%. That is very good progress. Information from the House of Commons Library, based on monitoring data supplied by the Environment Agency, shows that 97% of CSOs are monitored in Yorkshire, which is ahead of the national picture. In 2021, each CSO in Yorkshire discharged on average 34 times, with the average duration at 5.8 hours. While that is the second-best performance for the duration of discharges in England, it is still way too much and it shows just how far there is to go.

In terms of progress on this issue by my local water company, Yorkshire Water has recently announced an additional £100 million investment, funded by its shareholders, on top of its existing five-year business plan, aimed at reducing average bills by a minimum of 20% a year by March 2025, and that is compared with a baseline in 2021. In addition to the increased extreme weather and flash flooding events that cause CSOs to operate, a change to what we put into the system has been occurring over the past decade or so, particularly with wet wipes, but also with nappies being the main new entrants alongside fat from cooking.

Wet wipes are responsible for 90% of sewer blockages and contribute to the formation of fatbergs—all hon. Members probably know what fatbergs are; they are truly grim. When the sewers are blocked, the CSOs operate and flush the wet wipes, and anything that is backed up behind them, which obviously includes human waste, into waterways. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) has done good work with her Plastics (Wet Wipes) Bill to remove plastic from wet wipes. I support that work and think it is right, but even removing plastic from wet wipes is not guaranteed to make the problem go away. Consumer behaviour can change, however, which could help; the UK currently flushes 11 billion a year.

I raised the issue of new building standards at business questions last week. Rainwater run-off from new housing estates contributes to the volume of water that can overwhelm sewers and trigger a CSO to operate. In terms of building standards, developers must ensure that water is retained on site for longer before it is gradually released into the system. Attenuation tanks and ponds have a role to play. We have just had an important debate on levelling up rural Britain, and agricultural practices are also involved. Rainwater can cause fertilisers, pesticides and animal waste to enter rivers and lower water quality, which is highly significant in many parts of our country.

We as legislators also have a major role to play. The Environment Act 2021 contains a variety of measures, but at its heart is transparency. It makes it a legal requirement for companies to provide discharge data to the Environment Agency and make it available in near-real time to the public. That increase in monitoring and transparency has already led to more enforcement action, and in some cases fines, for water companies where breaches have been found—and quite right too.

I view water improvement as a real team effort; it is not for a single actor to take the actions. It means improved targets, vigilant monitoring, enforcement action, increased investment from water companies, and behavioural change. Achieving bathing water status is a significant step to implementing the changes needed to improve river water quality more widely because, if achieved, the Environment Agency will develop a bathing water profile and put plans in place to monitor and protect the bathing water.

That is why I wanted to bring this complex and long-standing issue to the House to ask the Minister what more can be done to promote the quality of inland waterways. Bathing water status in the UK has mainly been a coastal issue up to now, but rivers must be included far more in future. I also wanted to highlight, of course, our campaign to secure bathing water quality status for the River Nidd at the lido in Knaresborough to make one of Yorkshire's best even better.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Robbie Moore sought permission from the mover of the motion and the Minister to make a short contribution to this Adjournment debate, and they have agreed. I have been informed.

7.12 pm

**Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) on securing this important debate. I know how passionate he is about securing bathing water status for parts of the River Nidd in Knaresborough and I thank him for allowing me to make a short contribution.

In December 2020, a stretch of water on the River Wharfe in Ilkley in my constituency was granted bathing water status—the first stretch of river in the UK to be awarded such a designation. I know how important that is, having heard my hon. Friend's points about sewage getting into rivers. I put on record my thanks to the Ilkley Clean River Group, which did such a good job in getting our application off the ground in the first place and continuing with its efforts. I hope that my hon. Friend's campaign is a success.

Why does this matter? Simply, we all care about improving water quality and ensuring that our rivers are clean, healthy and thriving environments. Of course, achieving bathing water status on rivers provides an additional mechanism to ensure that a river ecosystem is as healthy as it can be. The River Wharfe in Ilkley has had, and continues to have, problems with pollution being discharged due to inadequate sewage infrastructure. When it rains, Yorkshire Water's sewage treatment works in the surrounding area often spill into the River Wharfe. Residents along Rivadale View will be familiar with that, as will residents downstream of the Ashlands sewage plant. Even more damaging are storm overflows, which are frankly inadequate to deal with the high percentage of rainfall we receive. My hon. Friend has already commented on our challenges with the combined sewer system.

Let us be clear: until now, no Government have had the willpower to tackle sewage discharge. I was pleased to vote for the Environment Act 2021, which will help tackle and put a stop to sewage discharge. I must say it was disappointing that the Opposition parties did not, like us, vote for that Act.

Of course, having secured bathing water designation, we are provided with an additional mechanism, which will help clean up our river system by putting additional pressure on water companies—in my case Yorkshire Water. Regular testing is now required. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that has resulted in the River Wharfe being classified as poor, but the data that is collected will put additional pressure on Yorkshire Water and other water companies to secure investment in infrastructure and additional apparatus to ensure that the stretches of water where bathing water designation is secured are clean.

Let me finish by making a couple of points about what I have learned from our experience. It is not good enough just to have a single monitoring point on a river; we must consider a stretch. I have concerns about the term “bathing water status”; I think “clean water status” would be much more apt, because that is what we are all trying to achieve, and there are some difficulties with rivers and it being safe to swim. In addition, the guidance from DEFRA needs to be updated to deal with rivers and not just coastal areas.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough and wish him all success in his campaign on the River Nidd. If he has the success that we have had in Ilkley, that will put more pressure on the utility companies to clean up our rivers, which is what we all want to see.

7.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):** I thank Members for showing such interest in this important subject. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who has a wonderful career ahead of him as a blue badge guide—or, indeed, in any role in the tourism industry in his area—such was the wonderful picture that he painted. I congratulate Members across the House on championing what DEFRA very much wants to achieve: clean water.

Let me set out how we are going to achieve that. We are absolutely committed to driving up the water quality of our lakes, our rivers and our coasts for the public to enjoy and for the benefit of nature. Designated bathing waters protect people's health at popular swimming spots across the country. As a Member of Parliament in the Lake district who has enjoyed much wild swimming for many of my 46 years, I know the benefits that that can bring. The water quality at those sites is monitored regularly—much more regularly than previously, as Members noted—and improvements are made if it does not meet the minimum standard.

There are 421 designated bathing waters in England. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the vast majority are coastal, but in the past two years we have designated our very first bathing waters on rivers. It is very much thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) that we have been able to achieve that in his constituency. I am pleased to say that we have many more applications for rivers to be designated bathing quality areas.

**Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):** The Minister will be surprised to hear that I want to talk about a river and not a lake. We are seeking bathing status and clean water status for the River Kent. The “Clean

[Tim Farron]

River Kent” campaign has raised over £8,000 to do sampling, lab testing and surveys—massive thanks to it for raising that money, and to the people who sponsored me to do the Staveley trail to help raise a bit of it. Does the Minister agree that the regulator should be driving this work, instead of local groups having to raise the money to do it? Does she also agree that the water companies could come up with some of the money to fund these bids, because, let’s be honest, it is their fault that the rivers are not in a clean state to start off with?

**Trudy Harrison:** The hon. Gentleman raises an excellent point on the part water companies must play in cleaning up our lakes, rivers and coastal areas. I am a neighbouring MP and will be delighted to meet him to talk about the natural management that could be done—very much part of my portfolio in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—to assist in cleaning up Lake Windermere in particular and of course the River Kent.

Bathing waters across England are a success story, with almost 95% achieving “good” or “excellent” status last year, the highest rate since the new stringent standards were introduced in 2015. Of these, 70% of bathing waters were classed as “excellent”, the highest quality standard, whereas just 28% of bathing waters met the highest standards in force in the 1990s. That demonstrates the excellent progress the Government are making in cleaning up our waters and holding water companies to account. Over the last 30 years, there has been good progress, following more than a century of poorly regulated industrial practices. A large proportion of the improving trend in bathing water quality can be attributed to improvements in sewage treatment.

Over £2.5 billion has been invested by English water companies to improve bathing water quality since privatisation, and England now has the cleanest bathing waters since records began. We know there is more to do to continue to drive up the quality of our rivers, lakes and coastal areas so people can enjoy them and nature can thrive. Areas used by large numbers of bathers and that have facilities to promote and support bathing are eligible for designation. We welcome applications for bathing water designations for both coastal areas and inland waters such as rivers. We actively encourage applications by writing annually to the chief executive of every local authority in England; we also write to other stakeholders such as swimming associations, because local authorities and stakeholders best know which popular riverside bathing areas may be suitable for designation. Once a site is designated as a bathing area, the Environment Agency will assess what action is needed to improve the water quality so that it can meet the standards that the public rightly expect and which are set by the bathing water regulations.

In 2021, we were delighted to approve the first designated river bathing water on the River Wharfe in Ilkley, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley for his superb championing to get that designation over the line—I know he is supporting other Members across the House. That was followed by Wolvercote mill stream on the River Thames at Oxford this year, so it is wonderful to have my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) here, championing bathing water quality and improving all water quality across the country. The designations are driving action to improve water quality.

My Department has received a lot of interest this year, and clearly society is paying a lot of attention to cleaning up our water. Our aim is to announce which new sites will be eligible to be designated before the start of the next bathing season, which is officially 15 May 2023, so get your Speedos ready—other outfits are available. We look forward to receiving the application for the River Nidd in the very near future, and I will be delighted to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, as will the Minister responsible for this area, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow).

Guidance to assist applicants with their applications is already available on the Government website, and we plan to update this next year. To respond to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, that will make it easier for community groups to understand the criteria for bathing water and ensure that only the necessary information is requested, to save such a lot of time and effort. In addition, we are reviewing the Bathing Water Regulations 2013 to ensure that they reflect changes to how and where people use bathing waters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough raised the subject of wet wipes. There is absolutely no doubt that wet wipes cause huge damage to sewers and to the environment when they are incorrectly flushed away. In fact, they make up 90% of the material that causes sewers to block. Let me take this opportunity to remind everybody across this House and across the country to bin it, don’t flush it.

Blockages can cause pollution and surface water flooding, and cost the water industry in England and Wales £100 million a year. The case for action is very clear. We are considering various options to tackle the issues caused by wet wipes. In November 2021 we launched a call for evidence that included questions on those options to help us build our evidence base and to inform our approach. That call for evidence closed on 12 February, and the Government will publish a response later this year.

Once again, I thank all Members, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, for championing the best quality water we can possibly achieve, to support people to enjoy bathing and so that nature benefits from clean water, which we will all benefit from. I also agree, as has been said across the House, that water improvement is a team effort. We can all play a part. That is why we will continue to take action to require water companies and industry to achieve the necessary improvements to reduce pollution. I am pleased that water companies have committed £56 billion to be spent over the coming years to clean our water and improve storm overflows.

We recognise that healthy and well-managed water is key to our wellbeing and an important part of the Government’s pledge to hand over our planet to the next generation in a better condition than we inherited it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I hope the Minister is reassured that my speedos are at the ready for about May, I should imagine, no sooner.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.27 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 November 2022

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

## Huntington's Disease

9.30 am

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered Huntington's disease.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to see the Minister in her place. I thank all the Huntington's disease organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for the vital work they do and for the help and expertise they have given me in preparing for this debate. Back in May I tabled early-day motion 72 on Huntington's, and I am really grateful for the support it received from Members on both sides of the House. My colleague Jackie Baillie tabled a similar motion in the Scottish Parliament, which I am told secured record support. I should also declare that my interest in this subject is the direct result of knowing someone who has the disease.

Huntington's is a rare genetic neurodegenerative disorder that, over time, basically stops the brain working properly. It affects some 8,000 people in the UK, but around 32,000 people are living at risk of developing it for the simple but deadly reason that Huntington's can be passed from generation to generation. This means that a diagnosis of Huntington's does not just affect the person who has it; it also affects their children, who have a one in two chance of carrying the gene. There is a predictive genetic test to find out whether someone has the faulty gene that causes the disease, but I am told that on learning of, say, their parent's diagnosis, the vast majority of people do not want to know and prefer to travel in hope. For all those reasons, it is a devastating diagnosis, because there is no cure, and there is only limited palliative care.

Imagine for a moment the questions that go through somebody's mind when a loved one gets the diagnosis. How long has my spouse or my parent got? What is going to happen when they can no longer look after themselves? Which of our children has it? Should we tell the rest of the family? Will my loved one's personality change, so that they end up shouting at me or even assaulting me? In many ways that is probably the most difficult thing to cope with, because we are losing the person we love not just physically but emotionally. This horrible disease makes them no longer the person they once were, and there is nothing—absolutely nothing—we can do about it.

It is very hard fully to convey what this means, so let me quote a letter I have received from someone who writes of

“being forced to witness the agonisingly slow degeneration of someone you have known and loved for nearly forty years, and how hard it is to keep remembering the person that they once were. That man—a loving, supportive spouse and utterly devoted father—was erudite, kind, attentive, with a wickedly dry sense of humour. He bears little resemblance to the unsteady figure with unclear speech, alternating between bouts of aggression, anxiety and apathy, with whom I now share my home.”

That is what sufferers and their families have to live with.

The symptoms of Huntington's are many, and the list I am about to give is by no means exhaustive. They include early onset dementia; difficulty concentrating; lapses of memory; cognitive decline; depression; anxiety; obsessive disorders; psychosis; stumbling and clumsiness; involuntary jerking or fidgety movements of the limbs and body; difficulty moving; mood swings; personality changes; irritability; apathy; disinhibition; problems swallowing, speaking and breathing; fatigue; loss of weight; incontinence; and sexual dysfunction. In the later stages, full-time nursing care is needed.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am immensely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. He is speaking very movingly.

One thing that has been emphasised to me is how important it is to remember the carers—particularly the family carers—affected by this condition. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will join me in impressing upon the Minister the importance to families who are going through this experience of granting the facility of respite care for family carers at a time of real carer shortages.

**Hilary Benn:** I am profoundly grateful to my right hon. Friend for attending this debate, and I agree completely with what she has said. I will come to the question of the needs both of people who have the disease and of those who care for them.

In short, those affected will lose the ability to walk, talk, eat, drink, make rational decisions and care for themselves. Partners and children are turned into carers, and children know that they themselves have a 50% chance of going through what they see unfolding in front of their eyes—a prospect that often results in self-harm, low esteem, low confidence, low mood, anxiety or depression.

Professionals, and indeed families, can sometimes mistake Huntington's for other conditions such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. That is especially true when the family has no idea that Huntington's exists in their family, and those living with it face a great deal of stigma and discrimination. It is not uncommon for a loved one to be wrongly accused of being drunk or on drugs due to their symptoms. The symptoms can start at an early age, and about 5% to 10% of sufferers experience them before the age of 20, although they usually appear between the ages of 30 and 50, and some 10% of sufferers develop them after the age of 60. The average survival time from first onset of symptoms is about 15 to 20 years.

Needless to say, people living with Huntington's and their families face extraordinary challenges in their lives because the condition affects everyone who comes into contact with it: those experiencing symptoms and their families, those who have tested positive but do not yet have symptoms, and people at risk of developing it. Even those who test negative can suffer from survivor guilt, and in some cases might be ostracised by their families.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. As he is demonstrating, this debate is about raising awareness of the challenges, and I know from the constituents I have heard from that that is one of the key things that family groups would like to see happen. Even though health is

[Patrick Grady]

a devolved matter, there is a consensus across the parties and throughout the UK that more needs to be done to ensure access to specialist services and to improve clinical research, and there are examples of collaboration, such as that between the University of Glasgow in my constituency and University College London.

**Hilary Benn:** I say to my hon. Friend, which he is on this occasion, that I am grateful for his attendance today and I agree with every point he has made. I will discuss research towards the end of my speech.

Young people who grow up in the shadow of Huntington's face daunting choices about genetic testing and whether to start a family. Should a young person tell a new partner about the condition? When should they tell their partner? How will the partner react? Many young people care for relatives while worrying that they will get the disease themselves. A Huntington's family member put it like this:

"Huntington's is a thief that slowly steals your body, energy, health, family, friends and the person you used to be."

Last year, a community survey undertaken as part of the Huntington's Disease Alliance UK and Ireland Family Matters campaign—that is quite a title—found that 98% of carers felt that Huntington's had negatively affected their loved one's emotional wellbeing; 88% said the disease had changed their relationship forever; and 70% went so far as to say that the impact had been either extremely difficult or life ruining, saying, "It has ruined our lives."

The disease has a huge effect on family finances and on the ability to work of the person and those who care for them. Sufferers eventually cannot hold down a job, their carer may have to give up their job to look after them, and all the while the bills mount. Income support and financial assistance to meet the cost of equipment and home adaptations is available, but it is limited and difficult to access. That is particularly the case for someone with Huntington's who does not yet display physical symptoms, and is therefore incorrectly believed not to be symptomatic and not entitled to financial support. That means that people who display only the less visible symptoms—say, mental health or cognitive ones—cannot get the help despite their debilitating effect. That cannot be right.

**Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con):** I add my congratulations from the Government side to the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and raising awareness of this appalling condition, and on his very powerful speech. He is talking about the support services available to the families and victims of this disease; because there is no national guidance, that is now a matter for the individual integrated care boards, which have replaced clinical commissioning groups. Does he agree that one of the outcomes of his securing this debate might be that the Minister commits to at least consider encouraging the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to establish national guidelines to ensure consistency of support throughout the country?

**Hilary Benn:** I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point; he anticipates my argument exactly. I and many other people think that is exactly what ought to happen for the very reasons he set out.

What needs to be done and how can the Minister help? That is why we are here today. First, we have to raise awareness of the impact of the disease and the suffering of those with it and their families. By acknowledging what it is and talking about it, we can help families who all too often choose the path of silence and shame because they do not want to talk about it to anybody else. We should say with one voice that no one should have to carry this burden alone.

Secondly, families need more support, including financial help and better care. There is some wonderful expertise in hospitals and a number of centres of excellence throughout the United Kingdom, including the Huntington's Disease Centre at University College London, but outside those specialist centres it is a different story. At the moment, it is hit or miss; it was put to me recently that it is more miss than hit in areas without specialist support. Social care is of course vital to help those with Huntington's to manage day-to-day life. The cost of private care for someone with Huntington's can amount to thousands of pounds a week—who can afford that? Some councils provide specialist care homes, but not all.

Let us begin by having a care co-ordinator—a Huntington's disease specialist—in every community to help to identify and keep in regular contact with Huntington's families in their area and guide them through the range of support that they need to meet their requirements. They would also help to improve understanding of the disease on the part of other health and social care professionals. It is hugely complex, and how it presents itself and the sheer scale of support that sufferers require are much misunderstood.

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, I am glad this issue is being discussed. He has powerfully explained the difficulties. According to a Genetic Alliance UK survey, 71% of those with rare diseases co-ordinate their own care, and that is often the case for people with Huntington's. Does he agree that it is really important that framework priority 3 of the rare diseases framework is used effectively to improve the co-ordination of care and make the situation much better?

**Hilary Benn:** I agree completely with my hon. Friend and congratulate her on her work chairing that all-party group.

There is a need for a Huntington's disease clinical lead in every area, which is not the case currently. We need consultants in psychiatry, genetics or neurology who can run clinics in collaboration with a local care co-ordinator or Huntington's disease specialist. As my hon. Friend identified, in the absence of that, carers carry a heavy load. Let me read what another person wrote to me:

"We learn to be our loved one's nurse, dietitian, speech and language therapist, risk assessor, health impact assessor, cognitive ability trainer, physiotherapist, medicine dispenser, advocate and care manager, amongst many other things."

That is one carer talking about their experiences. Those words reflect the fact that access to the right support is limited and varies across the UK, even though we have had commitments in the past decade, including the UK rare diseases framework in January last year.

Thirdly, we need better access to mental health services and support. I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about this in a recent written parliamentary question, and the answer said:

“Access to mental health services is based on clinical need, including for people with organic brain disorders such as Huntington's disease.”

I must tell the Minister that I have been advised by the Huntington's Disease Association that some mental health trusts exclude people with organic brain disorders, regardless of their presenting symptoms. If that is the case—I am sure the Minister will check after the debate—such practice would be at odds with what I was told in that answer. If that is the case, it cannot be right, because patients who experience mental health problems—those who are, for example, profoundly depressed or suicidal—need help regardless of the reason for their experiencing those symptoms. We need good support everywhere.

Fourthly, to come on to the point raised by the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), we need NICE to produce specific guidelines on the treatment of Huntington's disease, because there are currently none; that is in marked contrast to the situation for motor neurone disease, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis and epilepsy, for which there are NICE guidelines that have helped to improve treatment. Scotland already has a national care framework for Huntington's, which was developed by the Scottish Huntington's Association and funded by the Scottish Government. It makes clear that all NHS boards must have a Huntington's clinical lead and an adequate number of Huntington's specialists to support the local community. I am told that the majority of boards, although not yet all, now have such posts.

Formally setting out the needs of Huntington's families for all to see in NICE guidelines would surely be beneficial to the whole UK. I anticipate that the Minister will probably argue, in response, that

“There are no current plans for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to develop a guideline on Huntington's disease”,

and that

“NHS England is developing a neuropsychiatry service specification”.

I say that because that is what she said to me this week in answer to another of my written parliamentary questions. If that is still the Government's position, I urge the Minister to think again.

Huntington's disease is not just about neuropsychiatry. It is frankly so unique, it has such a complex range of symptoms and the challenges that it presents are so difficult, that all the UK's Huntington's disease organisations together believe—and I agree with them—that there is an overwhelmingly strong case for the development of NICE guidance on Huntington's that can support the care and management of patients and help to avoid the unwarranted variation in diagnosis and care that currently occurs. Apart from anything else, there are many clinicians and nurses who, on first encountering someone with Huntington's disease, have to admit that they know absolutely nothing about it—they have never seen it before. That is another powerful argument for NICE guidelines: they would set an expected standard and be backed up by NHS England, and sufferers and their families could draw attention to them if the services offered in their community fell short.

Fifthly, there is a specific issue related to our armed forces. Those who are known to be carriers of the gene are normally graded medically unfit for service, as are candidates with a proven immediate family history of the condition, unless they are known, as the result of a genetic test, not to carry the gene. By contrast, I am advised that some individual police forces do recruit candidates with the gene, but ask them to undergo a yearly meeting with a neurologist and have an MRI scan as a form of MOT.

I was encouraged by the answer to my written question to the Secretary of State for Defence, because it said:

“If there is clear evidence that a candidate is unlikely to develop Huntington's disease during a Service career”—

that can be as short as eight or 10 years, although it can be longer—

“then they may, on a case by case basis, be considered medical fit for service.”

I ask the Minister simply to pass on my words to the Defence Secretary, in the hope that young people in particular aged 16, 17 and 18 who have always dreamed of a military career will have the chance to fulfil their dreams.

The final thing I want to raise is research. Recently, we have seen the development of covid vaccines. We remember how antiretrovirals were created and turned HIV from a terminal illness into a disease that can be lived with. Science, as we know, has an astonishing capacity to change lives. As I said earlier, there is currently no treatment for Huntington's, but scientists have identified the gene, and that leads some people to argue that Huntington's is—this is a wonderful phrase—the most curable of the incurable diseases. That is why lots of research is going on—because the gene is known—and about eight or nine pharmaceutical companies are involved.

The disease is caused by a faulty protein, and Huntington's-lowering drugs, as I think they are called, aim to tell cells, “Make less of that.” That is sometimes referred to as gene silencing. There have been drug trials, including the Roche GENERATION-HD1 study, and the UK trial sites included Leeds—where my constituency is—Glasgow, Aberdeen and Cardiff. Unfortunately, last year that trial was halted, which was a terrible shock to the global Huntington's community. However, the treatment that was being tested is to be investigated in a new trial with a different cohort of patients, and other trials are looking at easing the impact on cognitive impairment. Yes, there have been setbacks, but there will be further trials. Other scientists, with very powerful microscopes, are peering at the make-up of the sticky proteins—if I may use that phrase—that seem to be associated with this disease, but also with Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease.

I thank all the scientists who are searching for ways of lessening the impact of this awful disease and, ultimately, for a cure, as well as all those who participate in the trials, because, when a treatment does come, we will remember them as the pioneers who made it happen. I am sure that the Minister and all of us here today offer our best wishes to the scientists and researchers, hope they have every success on their journey and want to encourage them—including, where necessary, by providing more funding—in order to speed us towards the extraordinary day, which the scientists are confident will eventually come, when the awful shadow of this



[Hilary Benn]

disease can be lifted from those who feel so helpless today. Until that day dawns, we must unite in our resolve to ensure that the families and their loved ones who have this appalling disease visited upon them have the support they need and deserve, regardless of where they live in our United Kingdom.

9.52 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in this Chamber. As the DUP health spokesperson, I wanted to add my contribution today. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on setting out the case so well and on doing so from a passionate, intimate and obviously knowledgeable point of view. It was hard to listen to some of the things he said, not because he does not put them over right, but just because, when we hear the emotion in his voice, we understand that he has a very personal interest in this subject. So, again, I thank him personally, as I think we all do in the Chamber today. I just want to add my contribution and, as I always do, to give a Northern Ireland perspective.

This is a difficult subject to deal with. As the right hon. Gentleman said, this disease does not just affect the person who has it; it can potentially affect the children as well. I think that makes things harder, because if someone has any doubt whatever as to whether they carry the gene, that will impact what they do when it comes to marriage, having children and having relationships, but also what will potentially happen to them in the latter part of their life. Therefore it is important that we take the right action to make our services better, and that is what we want to try to do.

May I say what a pleasure it is to see the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and to see the Minister in her place two days running? We are doing well here, so we are. The Minister tries extremely hard to answer the questions that we put forward, so I thank her for that. I am very pleased to see the Labour shadow Minister—a fellow Leicester City supporter—in her place. We won 3-0 last night, which was a good result. That is by the way and nothing to do with this debate; it is just for the hon. Lady and me to glory in that victory, as we do, personally and collectively.

We need to have better mental health services for patients suffering with this disease and to encourage more funding into research. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central was right about the importance of research; I will comment on research later, but he was right to mention the need for it. In a way, this debate follows on from some of the questions about research in the debate on pancreatic cancer that I secured in Westminster Hall yesterday. We have to focus on research in a deeper and stronger way, and I look forward to hearing the comments of others about what we can do for our constituents.

Health is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland and is not the Minister's responsibility, but I want to sew a Northern Ireland perspective into the debate. I will replicate the perspective heard in the right hon. Gentleman's comments, and talk about what we in the United Kingdom need to do in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I look forward to hearing from my friend and colleague

in the SNP, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), who always makes a significant contribution on health issues.

Huntington's services across the UK lack efficiency and funding, especially in Northern Ireland. That is not the Minister's fault, but it shows what this is all about. One of my constituents made me aware of the fact that there are only two Huntington's-qualified nurses across the whole of Northern Ireland—for a population of 2 million. Wow! It shocks me to the core when I read that and have to convey the situation in Northern Ireland. As a result of the right hon. Gentleman raising my awareness of this matter, I will take a deeper interest in it from a Northern Ireland perspective. I will follow this up with Robin Swann, the Northern Ireland Health Minister.

In that population of 2 million, the rate of Huntington's has increased from 6.4 people per 100,000 in 1991 to 12 per 100,000—almost doubling over that period of time. Approximately 223 people have been diagnosed with the disease back home, leaving many with the possibility of getting it genetically. That is one of the worst things: someone could be carrying the disease without knowing—this rare condition is also known as the disease of families.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who has left her place, is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions. Huntington's is a rare condition, and sometimes the symptoms are not as prevalent, making it even more essential for people to be aware of them. I would subscribe to the hon. Lady's line of thought that this should be categorised as a rare disease: statistically, the numbers suffering from this disease are not large, and it is rare in the effect that it has. Government have a policy to deal with rare diseases, so maybe it is time to consider this as one of those, Minister.

Huntington's Disease Association Northern Ireland has been instrumental in providing support for families—it is not all doom and gloom in Northern Ireland for the families and those who support them. The association has a lovely motto: "Families at the heart of all that we do". That conveys the importance of what it does, bringing families together so that they can help and reach out to each other. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central referred to that point, and I would reiterate it.

The organisation offers care to loved ones and encouragement throughout the process. Not only that, but it provides hope for those dealing with Huntington's. Currently, 15 clinical trials of different treatments are under way. We should take some encouragement from that and have hope of a cure. With 15 clinical trials taking place, there is hope that one day soon—not too far away—we will have a cure. If we have that cure, we can deal with these issues better personally.

Sorcha McGuinness of HDANI has stated that, by the late stages of the condition, people will require 24-hour care, as the right hon. Gentleman referred to. They will be unable to move, speak or sometimes even swallow. Other diseases we have spoken about, such as motor neurone disease, are similar.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** The hon. Gentleman is speaking movingly and powerfully. Members will be concerned when we hear from constituents who are being refused personal independence payments. The procedure that

applicants—people with Huntington's disease and their families—have to go through to get PIP, to which they are entitled, is almost a test of their perseverance. As MPs, many of us have to deal with these things, but there must be a better way of dealing with families affected by conditions such as Huntington's. Given what they are likely to need and that their care needs are so great, we must find a better way of dealing with this issue.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, which clearly outlines another issue. It is not always health alone that is an issue; it is also about not being able to work again, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said. There is the financial impact on families. There is going on to benefits, which are probably alien to those applying. The system needs a wee bit more compassion for those who are under financial pressure. When they state that they have Huntington's disease, the reality of what that means should figure in how they are helped through PIPs and other benefits. More often than not, we—elected representatives—come to an acknowledgment and knowledge of those matters through constituents who apply for PIPs. We understand a bit better what they are doing. There is one lady in my office who does nothing but benefits—five days a week. That gives Members an idea of the magnitude of this issue. The right hon. Lady is right, and I thank her for her intervention.

As the disease becomes increasingly debilitating, there is a need for more trained specialists in it. I ask again the question asked by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, and we look to the Minister for help: what can be done, and what is being done, to increase the numbers of trained nurses? The disease affects the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so what discussions has the Minister had, or will she have, with the devolved Administrations to ensure that there is a universal strategy for moving forward that encompasses us all?

A nurse who is qualified in Huntington's plays a key part in the patient's life, as the link to mental health. Physically, the patient's body is dying—that is what is happening. Mentally, the disease affects them with anxiety, depression and all those issues. They feel it as it overtakes them and as their bodies decay. The nurse is also the link to neurology, GPs, social services and occupational therapy. I come back to the comment about PIPs made by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). When our staff fill in PIPs forms, we look at how occupational therapy can add aids that help patients around the house. There is only so much that can be done for Huntington's, and perhaps other diseases, but there is a key role for the occupational therapist in helping families to deal with it, whether that means a bed downstairs, an extension to the house or a walk-in shower. At certain stages of the game, of course, those things will not help, but perhaps early on they can.

In the area covered by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which includes my constituency, patients are referred to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust specialist nurse, and the cost is covered by the Health and Social Care Board. Patients living in the western, northern and southern trust areas in Northern Ireland have no access to Huntington's disease specialist nurses. Some sufferers have described the condition as a

vacuum of silence—that is what it is. They feel almost isolated—on their own—and they are very much dealing with all the issues without help. When people are living in complete isolation, with no assistance, it is important that there is someone they can turn to.

Although I appreciate that health is devolved in Northern Ireland, the situation unfortunately remains the same in the rest of the UK, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said and as others will as well. There is no equality of care, and Huntington's disease patients still feel left behind. Through this debate and through awareness raising, we must try to address that. If the number of people diagnosed with Huntington's disease continues to rise, the Government must review its status as a rare disease. I said that earlier on, and I say it again. Perhaps we need to move it into a priority category as soon as we can.

I look to the Minister, as I will continue to do whenever she is responsible for the answers, and to her counterparts in the devolved Administrations to initiate funding for greater care for those in the early and latter stages of the disease. We referred to those 15 clinical trials earlier. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central referred to the clinical trials and how important it is to find a cure, help that research and bring new symptoms to light.

Familial carers desperately need their loved one to have professional care, so that they can seek some respite, without being sick with worry about them. They need respite care—we say that often, but Huntington's disease is such an all-encompassing disease that it totally takes over the life of families. That respite care has to be there to give them a half-day or even a few hours off from the 24/7 focus they have. Some indication in the Minister's response that there will be some help with respite care would be helpful.

10.5 am

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is so often left until the end in these debates. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on securing this important debate on what is a very serious issue and on setting it out so thoroughly with his typical style and power. It is very apposite that the debate is being held today, just a few days before the Scottish Huntington's Association has its first family gathering since the start of the pandemic, which is taking place in Falkirk this Saturday. I hope they enjoy themselves.

As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central set out so well, this is a complex, hereditary neurological condition that impacts not only individuals but entire families across many generations. There is currently no cure, and children of parents diagnosed with Huntington's are at a 50% risk of inheriting it. In 2019, I was contacted by the Scottish Huntington's Association, which is based in my constituency, regarding the ongoing stigma and discrimination faced by the children of parents with Huntington's disease, due to the possibility that they may inherit it. The need to raise awareness of the challenges that individuals and families in the Huntington's community experience is as prevalent today as it was then. Indeed, a recently published YouGov survey on the disease shows the scale of the challenge: only 37% of

[Gavin Newlands]

UK adults were aware that Huntington's is related to the brain; only 36% were aware that it is incurable, gets worse over time and is ultimately fatal; 45% did not know that the primary cause is an hereditary condition; and, crucially, 25% had never even heard of Huntington's.

People and families living with HD face multiple challenges, many of which have been highlighted by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central. Another issue that the SHA highlighted to me is insurance. Something that most of us take for granted can be entirely unobtainable or unaffordable for those with, or at risk from, HD.

The SHA is the only charity in Scotland dedicated exclusively to improving the lives of people impacted by Huntington's. The organisation takes a family-centred approach, with a focus on delivering change for local communities through a team of specialist staff, youth advisers and financial wellbeing services. Their work has been not only recognised but replicated at both national and international levels as a model of excellence for the care and support of the Huntington's disease community.

In 2015, the person-centred national care framework, which has been referenced, was developed by a multi-disciplinary expert group led by the SHA, with funding and support provided by the Scottish Government. At the core of that framework was the need for every NHS board area to have a sufficient number of HD specialists available to support families in their Huntington's journey, as well as a Huntington's disease clinical lead. The SHA said at the time:

"The development of this Framework—the first of its kind in the world—presents Scotland with a unique opportunity to significantly drive up health and social aspects of care and support provided to HD families throughout the country."

I want to stress that this is entirely party apolitical: the framework had the support of all parties in the Scottish Parliament.

There are five guiding principles of the national care framework. The first is a person-centred approach:

"An approach to providing health and social care which puts an emphasis on understanding the world from each individual's perspective.

The Person Centred Approach makes the quality of the relationship between the individual and those providing support central to the process. Understanding the emotional life of each individual is important to ensure that care can be tailored accordingly.

In HD this also includes understanding the unique ways that HD changes how someone might think or behave and adapting care around the person to take account of this."

The second principle, which is also crucial, is a family systems approach:

"An approach ensuring that the needs of the whole family are taken into consideration.

The Family Systems Approach promotes an understanding that the impact of HD affects not individuals but entire families."

The third principle is a biopsychosocial—that is a bit of a mouthful—model of health and disability:

"An approach that ensures that—as well as understanding the health impact of HD—health and social care staff also consider the social and psychological impact of the disease for each person.

This approach fits closely with the person centred approach."

The fourth principle is personalisation:

"A way of thinking about delivering services that tries to design them to suit each individual rather than people fitting into predefined service 'boxes'."

Finally, and sadly, comes the palliative care approach:

"The active total care of clients whose disease is not responsive to curative treatment. Control of pain, of other symptoms and of psychological, social and spiritual problems is paramount. The goal of palliative care is the achievement of the best quality of life for clients and their families. Many aspects of palliative care are also applicable earlier in the course of the illness in conjunction with treatment."

Since the publication of the framework, services across Scotland have grown significantly, and the country is now edging closer to having an HD specialist and clinical lead in every mainland NHS board. To be clear, we have made massive strides in Scotland, but gaps still exist and more still needs to be done. I really hope that lessons can be learned from that approach for the rest of the UK, or indeed elsewhere. Astri Arnesen, the president of the European Huntington Association, has said:

"The Framework stands out to me as an invaluable resource on how to deal with HD. It is exactly what we need—not just information about HD but insight on how life with HD can be and how it can be managed whether you are impacted by HD directly or a relative, friend, colleague or anyone in touch with an HD affected family. The framework manages to cover the immense complexity of the disease in a very structured and straightforward way. A wonderful tool—hereby warmly recommended for Scotland and beyond its borders. I hope it will be widely shared and used!"

The support delivered by specialist services such as the SHA can provide invaluable care to individuals and families during their time of need and can be the difference between families coping and not coping. In Scotland, about 1,000 people have been diagnosed with Huntington's, and an estimated 4,000 are at risk of inheriting the condition. In about 5% to 10% of cases, symptoms of the disease develop before the age of 20. A study by the University of Aberdeen highlighted that the number of HD cases in northern Scotland is now five times the global average, an increase of almost 50% over the last 30 years. Those numbers are, sadly, expected to be replicated across the rest of Scotland.

The SHA continues to highlight the challenges that specialist staff face due to the significant increase in cases over the years. However, that is still not reflected in the availability of resources, with some areas having no specialist services, despite the strides that we have made.

The chief executive of SHA, Alistair Haw, has said:

"Huntington's disease is a hugely complex, widely misunderstood, and extremely difficult to manage condition. Specialist services are not some nice to have optional extra but an absolute necessity. Given the rise in cases over recent years a commensurate rise in specialist services is now required. Our Parliaments have backed this proposition resoundingly. The time has come for Scotland's health and social care providers to take heed, and act."

The growing need for specialist HD services has never been more prevalent, given the ongoing increase in demand. To conclude in a similar fashion to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, the inexcusable burden placed on those caring for loved ones with Huntington's must be addressed, in the hope of ensuring that all individuals and families impacted by the disease receive the highest quality and consistency of care, regardless of whether they live in Aberdeen, Aberavon, Ansty or Antrim. I hope that the Minister will take on board the contributions of all Members here today.



**Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair):** We come to the Front Benchers' speeches. I call Stephen Bonnar.

10.15 am

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) for securing this debate on what is an increasingly prevalent feature across our communities. He made a powerful and heartfelt contribution, and I thank him for it. I also place on record my full support for his early-day motion 72, whose aims echo those of a motion already passed in Holyrood by 98% of Members of the Scottish Parliament—we would like that sort of unity in this place—which aims to expand the range of specialist services available to all those with Huntington's disease.

This has been an excellent debate, with powerful and thoughtful contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of the long-term impact on the life of a young person with the gene and how it can affect their whole life, marriage, opportunities, finances and all that goes with them as they go on their journey through this world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke of Scotland's national care framework for Huntington's, and its five principles. For obvious reasons, we are keen to champion that excellent body of work, and I hope that the Minister will take note of it. I thank all Members who have contributed to this morning's excellent debate.

Huntington's disease is an inherited condition. It is a progressive disease that slowly leads to the loss of the ability to walk, talk, eat, drink and make decisions of care for oneself, as well as the many other issues outlined by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central. It causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain. That gets gradually worse over time and is ultimately fatal after between 10 and 25 years.

We have heard that each child of a person with the Huntington's gene has a 50% chance of inheriting this awful condition. Affected children can likewise pass the gene to their own offspring.

According to the Scottish Huntington's Association:

"Around 1 in 5000 people in Scotland has Huntington's disease", which means that about 1,100 people are living in Scotland with Huntington's disease,

"and an estimated 4,000-6,000 others...are at risk of inheriting it from their parents."

Recent research has highlighted alarming figures, showing that the prevalence of Huntington's disease in Scotland is almost three times greater than reported elsewhere in Europe, North America and Australia, and, as has been mentioned, is more than five times greater than the worldwide average. Those are not mere figures or statistics, worrying and sobering as they are. They are people's lives—our citizens—and it is the duty of all of us to do our utmost to protect our people wherever possible.

With that principle in mind, the Scottish Government have released funding to allow University of Aberdeen academics and NHS Grampian Huntington's disease clinic staff to lead pioneering research into tackling the disease. They have done so by leading on international drug trials, attempting to find ways to slow the progression of the disease and to increase our understanding of

potential generational cures. The researchers have also gone one step further by engaging in close partnership with families affected by Huntington's and working with the Scottish Huntington's Association—we have heard much about its work already, and I place on record my thanks for it.

We must always remember that the disease is not about one individual, as we have heard. It is a cruel disease that has the power to destroy entire families. My heart goes out to all those who have lost loved ones through this horrible illness.

Children and young people have informed that body of work by agreeing to be interviewed about their experience of Huntington's. That has allowed tools to be developed to support parents who face dilemmas about how, when and what to tell their children about the genetic condition. The use of such interviews is groundbreaking, taking a fully holistic approach to medical research within this field, and guided by one of the principles of Scotland's national care framework—a family systems approach. I hope that that approach will be considered by other academics and Governments across the other nations of the UK.

Dr Karen Keenan, who conducted those interviews, explains:

"Living with a parent who has a serious hereditary degenerative condition like Huntington's disease (HD) can be extremely difficult for children and young people. Many witness the loss of a parent as the illness progresses, whilst also discovering they are at 50% risk of developing the disease themselves in adult life."

Families with Huntington's disease can also face or feel considerable stigma, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North outlined. There are higher rates of family breakdown and often there is secrecy about the existence of the disease within a family. The readiness to deal with a diagnosis is so important.

The Scottish Huntington's Association is the only charity in Scotland exclusively dedicated to supporting families impacted by HD. It does this through a team of Huntington's specialists, specialist youth advisers and a finance wellbeing service. The lifeline service provided by the association can and does make the difference between families coping and not coping. We can all find out more about its work by visiting [hdscotland.org](http://hdscotland.org). I encourage all to do so.

Scottish-led research has been instrumental in identifying a need for age-appropriate information and support for children and young people impacted by the disease, and a need for parental guidance about disclosure to children and young adults. Over the last two decades, studies conducted by Scottish researchers have built an evidence base that has been used to inform support services for young people across Scotland, Europe and the rest of the world. It has influenced health and training, and social care professionals in the work that they do each and every day. I am sure we would all like to place on record our thanks and gratitude to them for that work.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on the Government's approach as we all go forward together. Cross-party support in both the Scottish and the UK Parliament is quite apparent. The togetherness in this room during debates such as this, where we are all in total agreement, is another step forward in the right direction of raising awareness of this genetic illness.

10.22 am

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair, Mr Robertson. I really congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on securing this debate. He spoke with great authority and passion, including about the person he knows. It means a lot that this place can reflect how people really feel when they have to live with this terrible disorder and the impact it has on their families.

As we have heard, it is a totally life-changing disorder, impacting on not just the person's health but, I would argue, everything that makes them human, which is their relationships with the people they love most. We are the sum total of our experiences and memories, and our relationships with people. When someone we love loses those memories and becomes a different person, it has a deep effect on us, too. As Members have already said, it is about not just the 8,000 people who are living with this diagnosis in the UK—including about 100 in Leicester and Leicestershire, which is the part of the country that I represent—but their 32,000 children. Growing up knowing that the disease may end up affecting them too is a terrible burden.

The support that should be available needs to be very broad, and I know from my experience of working in health and care over the last 30 years that that is one of the key areas where we fall down. When so many different types of services and support are needed, bringing those all together for a very specialist and rare condition is one of the biggest challenges we face in the health and care system. As we begin to know more about diseases, particularly through genetic developments, we are going to see more and more of this in future. If we can get it right for Huntington's, we know that we may be able to get it right for other conditions.

There are three areas that I want to talk about today. The first is obviously the critical issue of access to mental health services. Provision of comprehensive, specialist psychological care is an essential component of treating and dealing with Huntington's disease, yet we know that access to that specialist care is limited and varies significantly across the country. Despite clear commitments from statutory bodies over many years—over the past decade, at least—the situation has improved little for families.

Research from the Huntington's Disease Association shows that a quarter of people living with the disease are unable to access psychologists, psychiatrists and other counselling when required. I was really struck when the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that there are only two specialist nurses for 2 million people in Northern Ireland. That simply is not good enough. Specialist nurses provide unbelievable support to families, and have the ability, knowledge and time to talk things through, so that has to change. That is part of a wider picture of significant staff shortages in mental health. Currently, one in seven mental health doctor posts and one in five mental health nursing posts are vacant. We simply cannot provide the access or standards of care that we need, including for people with Huntington's disease, unless we tackle that problem.

As part of Labour's plan for mental health, we would recruit 8,500 more mental health professionals, funded by closing tax loopholes for private equity fund managers and removing the VAT exemption from private schools.

That would give us the extra staff we need across the board, including for people suffering from Huntington's disease and their families. People often suffer from anxiety and depression after a diagnosis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central talked about the impact on children and young people, who experience anxiety, depression and self-harm as a result of what they fear may lie ahead of them. We must focus on that issue.

Labour's plan for mental health will also help to improve the quality of services, including by broadening the range of services available to those with severe mental illness. They will also require talking therapies and other interventions to help them live as well as they can as the disorder progresses. I hope the Minister will set out in detail what the Government will do to increase the mental health workforce, both in community services and in the specialist services that people with severe conditions require.

Staff shortages in mental health are a critical issue, but there are wider barriers. Many people with Huntington's disease say that they struggle to get a specialist referral in the first place because there is a lack of awareness of the issue. My mental health trust has talked about the issues we have faced across county borders. We are developing specialist services for Huntington's disease, but neighbouring counties are not, so it is challenging to get cross-county referrals.

The real issue is the problem of co-ordinating the care pathway for people with Huntington's disease. People and families feel that they are in a constant battle with support services, and have to tell their story time and time again. The last thing that people faced with this terrible situation want is to battle the services.

The charities working in this area and my right hon. Friend have called for the development of NICE guidelines to ensure greater consistency in treatment and support for people with this condition. There is a very strong case for that, not simply because NICE guidelines exist for people with other conditions, but because unless something is set out for rare conditions, it is a real challenge to improve the quality of care and support. I ask the Minister to engage further on this issue with my right hon. Friend, the Huntington's Disease Association and NICE, to see what progress can be made.

Families do not just need help from the NHS; they need help from social care too. The average survival time after a diagnosis of Huntington's disease is between 15 and 20 years. During that time, the condition targets nerve cells in the brain, causing motor, cognitive and psychiatric symptoms that get progressively worse. The person living with the disease needs various sorts of care, including from the social care sector, but too often the burden is being shouldered by families in an unsustainable way. Many families say that, until the onset of the symptoms, they do not get the support they need. Again, there is a huge number of vacancies in social care—160,000, which is the highest it has ever been. Families have no choice other than to take on more of that burden themselves, which has a huge impact on their jobs, relationships and careers.

At the heart of Labour's plan for social care is a new deal for care workers. It would allow us to recruit and retain the staff we need by ensuring fair pay and terms and conditions, and by improving training and career progression. We simply cannot give the families of

people living with Huntington's the support they need unless we have a properly staffed care workforce. We would also have a new partnership with families, so that they get proper information, advice and breaks, and so that we join up services and people do not have to battle their way around the system.

We cannot improve the quality of care and support for people with rare conditions such as Huntington's unless families are equal partners. That needs to be at the heart of any future development, and particularly the NICE guidelines. The people who know how best to join up care and support are the families, because they do not see their loved one's needs in separate departmental service silos. They do not think, "They have a social care need over here, and a health need over there"—they see their loved one as one person. We need families to help develop the NICE guidelines.

Last but by no means least, we need to touch on the financial strain facing those with Huntington's disease. People with Huntington's and their families tend to have lower incomes. That is often because the person has to give up work, as do their family members in order to care for them, but lower than average incomes are compounded by higher than average costs. Because of the involuntary movements associated with the condition, people with Huntington's need higher-calorie diets, which means increased food bills. They also have to stay at home, which means higher energy costs, and extra washing is required, too.

The Huntington's Disease Association recently did a survey looking at cost of living issues. It found that many people were cutting back on the absolute basics and were really worried about the increasing risk of debt and homelessness. Indeed, it wrote to the Chancellor about this issue on 26 October. Could the Minister encourage the Chancellor to reply to that letter? This is a pressing and immediate issue that people are facing. Members will know that Labour has called for a windfall tax on gas and oil profits in order to support struggling families during the cost of living crisis, and I wonder whether the Government will now agree to that.

There is hope for the future. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central said, there have been developments on diseases that we thought nothing could ever be done about. There is hope for scientific developments, especially in genetic technologies, but there are also things we can do in the here and now to better support families, such as improving the mental health and social care workforce, and dealing with the cost of living pressures that families face. I hope that the Minister will address those points.

10.34 am

**The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Helen Whately):** I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on securing this debate on Huntington's disease, and on shining a light on this condition, which we all recognise has a truly devastating impact on those affected by it and their loved ones. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his speech. It is a pleasure to be together in Westminster Hall for the second day running. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) gave a perspective from Scotland, and we also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) and the right hon.

Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), which shows the interest in and concern about care for people suffering from Huntington's disease.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central spoke powerfully and clearly drew on his own experience, as he mentioned that he knows somebody with Huntington's disease. It is important that we all bring to this place our own experiences, whether they arise from speaking to our constituents or from contact with family and friends, because they add to what we can do here in Parliament.

The right hon. Gentleman gave a long list of the symptoms of Huntington's and their consequences, and described how all that can play out for individuals with the disease—agonisingly slowly over 15 to 20 years. He also spoke about what that means for those around the sufferer, not only as carers, but as family members who might carry the gene, but who might choose not to have a test and to live without knowing whether they have it. Clearly, that brings its own challenges, including mental health challenges. He made a point that I found very powerful: he said that Huntington's is a thief that slowly steals family, friends and the person someone used to be. I am sure that rings true to people who are suffering from the disease and those who love them. I thank him for bringing the issue here, and for speaking so powerfully.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several questions, which I will come to, but I want to start from the top: Huntington's disease is estimated to affect one person in 10,000 in the UK, so it is a rare disease. Rare diseases are those that affect fewer than one person in 2,000. While rare diseases are individually rare, sadly, they are all too common collectively. One person in 17 will be affected by a rare disease at some point in their life, and in the UK that amounts to more than 3.5 million people. We must ensure that they get the best possible diagnosis, treatment and support.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Minister is generous in giving way. The available figures suggest that 8,000 people are affected by this truly awful disease, but in truth, owing to the problems with diagnosis that have been described, and due to stigma and misrecorded deaths, the prevalence of Huntington's is uncertain. Will she give us a sense of what the Department is doing to secure a more accurate estimate of the figure, which would give us a better grasp of the scale of the challenge?

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, some people choose not to find out whether they carry the gene. Let me look into the hon. Gentleman's question. I am happy to write to him with an answer.

Research is the key to swifter diagnosis, for those who want to know whether they carry the gene, and to better treatment of Huntington's, which will ultimately give those who carry the gene the hope of better prospects. Through research, we are making major advances in diagnosing and treating Huntington's disease. The Government primarily fund research on rare diseases such as Huntington's via the National Institute for Health and Care Research, as well as through UK Research and Innovation. We have funded £32.6 million-worth of research on Huntington's disease through those organisations over the past five years. Through its



[Helen Whately]

clinical research network, the NIHR has supported 43 studies into the disease over that period, particularly ensuring that scientific breakthroughs can be translated into treatments that will actually benefit patients. An example of that comes from researchers at the NIHR's biomedical research centre at Guy's and St Thomas's NHS Foundation Trust, who have pioneered research on diagnosis of Huntington's disease. Their work has led to the world's first genetic test using nanopore-based DNA sequencing technology, which may be able to diagnose even the most complicated cases of Huntington's disease in a matter of days, instead of weeks.

As part of England's first rare diseases action plan, published in February this year, we announced £40 million of new funding for the NIHR BioResource, a bank of genetic data that is helping us understand the genetics of rare diseases. That action plan commits us to mapping the rare disease research landscape, so that we can identify gaps and priorities for future research funding. The results of that analysis will be published in the new year. NHS England recently published "Accelerating genomic medicine in the NHS", a five-year strategy that sets out an ambition to accelerate the embedding of the use of genomic medicine across the health service. That includes continuing to deliver equitable genomic testing for improved prediction and diagnosis of conditions such as Huntington's disease.

Many Members spoke about the experience of caring for people with Huntington's, and the challenges involved in navigating the health and social care system. As this rare disease has such a complex range of symptoms, people have to navigate physical and mental healthcare, and of course social care. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central called for a Huntington's care co-ordinator in every community. The current approach to improving care for people with Huntington's and other neurological conditions is in the NHS England neurosciences transformation programme, which is identifying and setting out what good care looks like for people with neurological conditions, and what services they need. Those findings will be used to inform and advise integrated care systems on the services that they commission. The ICCs should then commission that range of services for people with diseases such as Huntington's, who can then better access the support that they need. However, I will take away the right hon. Gentleman's specific request for care co-ordinators, look into the matter, and get back to him.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about NICE guidelines, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), and it is true, as was stated in the answer to his parliamentary question, that there is no NICE guideline specific to Huntington's. In advance of this debate, I looked into that, and the expert view that I have been given is that Huntington's sits under a recent NICE guideline on a range of neurodegenerative conditions that are grouped together, albeit that we recognise the differences in progression, prevalence and severity of those conditions. That said, I have heard the argument made by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, and I will ask again about the case for doing something more specific to Huntington's.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about symptoms, and about mental healthcare for people with Huntington's, as did the shadow Minister. The right hon. Gentleman talked about the mental health ramifications of the disease, which are an aspect of it that makes it so distressing and difficult for those who have it and their loved ones. People with Huntington's should of course receive mental healthcare and support, and the Government are investing in mental health: an extra £2.3 billion per year will go into mental healthcare by 2023-24 to improve access and capacity in our mental health system. That said, I was concerned to hear from him that some people might not be receiving mental healthcare, and might be being excluded as a matter of policy, because of the nature of Huntington's. I will take that point up with the mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield).

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central spoke about the Ministry of Defence. I reassure Members that the armed forces do not conduct genetic testing for Huntington's disease in their medical assessments. That said, I am told that if a candidate knows of a family history of Huntington's, it is for the candidate to provide medical evidence that they are unlikely to develop the disease in the service. I am aware that the genetics of Huntington's disease are complex, and that the likelihood of an armed forces candidate developing the disease and the likely age of presentation depend on the number of repeating sections in the gene responsible for it. More repeats cause an earlier age of onset. I am sure that the right hon. Member knows that, as will other experts in the condition. I am told that, if there is clear evidence that a candidate is unlikely to develop Huntington's disease during a service career, they may, on a case-by-case basis, be considered medically fit for service; however, the right hon. Member made an important point about young people being able to fulfil their dream of serving in our armed forces, and I will take that message to my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, as he asked me to.

Once again, I thank the right hon. Member for leading today's important debate, and other Members who spoke in it. I too extend my thanks to the rare diseases community, including carers, clinicians, patient organisations, Huntington's disease charities across the UK, and the researchers who work tirelessly to improve the lives of people affected by Huntington's disease and all other rare conditions. It has been very helpful to have this debate. The right hon. Member made specific points that I will take away and respond to. Overall, it is a very good thing that we have shone a light on what people suffering from Huntington's disease, and their family and friends, are going through. I will do all that I can as the Minister with oversight of this area to make things better for them.

10.46 am

**Hilary Benn:** I thank all colleagues who have been present—those who were able to stay to the end of the debate, and those who obviously had other matters to attend to. There has been a striking unity of purpose and resolve. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution. He will clearly follow up on the point about Huntington's nurses in Northern Ireland. I did not know that statistic. I am sure that he will do so with his normal dedication.

I thank the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who made a really important point about PIP. It is a more general point about something that many of us will have experienced. We know what it can be like to make a PIP application. Figures for tribunal cases—I looked a couple of years ago at the figures for Leeds—show that more than 50% of people who appeal to the tribunal have the decision overturned, so we have not got that process right. To draw a parallel, if 50% of people convicted in a criminal court had their conviction overturned in a court of appeal, there would be a national scandal and outrage; yet over half of the cases that eventually get to the tribunal—after months, because there is a long delay—find that the original assessment by the Department for Work and Pensions was not correct. There will undoubtedly be people with Huntington's in that group, so the right hon. Member raised a really important point.

I thank the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) for talking about the work being done in Scotland, and for highlighting the high and increasing incidence of Huntington's in that part of our United Kingdom. Why that might be, and whether it is due to better diagnosis, we probably do not know. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), who talked about the constant battle. She made the powerful point that if we could get it right for Huntington's, it will help us to get it right for other diseases.

That brings me on to what the Minister had to say. I am genuinely grateful for her response and its tone. She said that she would take things away and look at them. The Huntington's disease community will be back. I look forward to her response, because the request for a care co-ordinator is, as she can tell, heartfelt. She is going to go away and look at it, and I am sure that is the most one can ask for, but we would like to see a result in guidance and policy. On NICE guidelines, I heard her

argument, which I anticipated she would make, but I welcome the fact that she will go away and look at the issue again. We have NICE guidelines for the other conditions that I mentioned. Given the nature of this disease, its all-encompassing impact, and what we have heard, including from Huntington's disease associations around our country, about the difficulties that people experience, the case is overwhelmingly strong for NICE guidance to be produced on Huntington's. We shall return to that. I suppose I take what she said as perhaps a slight opening of the door.

I am very grateful to the Minister for saying that she will go away and look at the issue of mental health, and will pass on to the Defence Secretary the point that I raised about the armed services. In one sense, of all the replies to the parliamentary questions that I asked, the one to my question to the Defence Secretary was the most encouraging; he said that the services would be willing, in the right circumstances, with evidence, which I accept that candidates will need to provide, to consider recruiting those with the gene who they do not think are likely to get the disease.

I thank the Government for the money that they are putting into research. There is always a need for more funding for all sorts of research. The Minister was right to start with that, because if we can find a way of eradicating this gene, treating it, and preventing it from being passed on, all the other things that we have talked about will be echoes of the past for those who lived in an era when there was not a cure. All of us recognise that that day cannot come soon enough, but in the meantime, we need to be better at helping those who have the disease, and the families and loved ones who care for them.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Huntington's disease.

10.52 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Creative Industries: North-east

11 am

**Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair):** I will call Julie Elliott to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond. As is the case with 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

**Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of the creative industries to the North East.

As ever, it is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. Today I will speak about the significance and impact that the arts and cultural sector has on our communities and on the economy and, in particular, the huge benefits that Sunderland has seen from recent developments. Sunderland and the wider north-east has always been a hub for culture and creatives. The recent growth in investment and attention shows just how significant the potential of that sector is, and gives a good indication of where we are headed. The many partnerships that the creative industries have developed in the area over the last few years have boosted the opportunities for jobs, the development of skills, and community engagement, as well as bringing people in from near and far. That benefits the local and regional economy.

The creative industries and cultural sector combined are worth just under £1.5 billion in gross value added to the north-east economy. That shows how much the sector contributes, and, more importantly, how much room there is for growth and how far investment has the potential to go. We have seen a 43% increase in the economic value of the creative industries in the north-east over the last 12 years, since I became a Member of Parliament, and a 10% increase in the cultural sector. That is at a time when the Government have cut council budgets, which has in turn been passed on to the creative and cultural sectors, and the pandemic set the sectors back across the north-east and the country.

There are some 3,500 people employed in the sector in Sunderland, and there are tens of thousands of job opportunities across the north-east. Sunderland is a city that has a creative and cultural sector steeped in history, from historic institutions like the Sunderland Empire—a landmark of the city, dating back to 1907, that welcomes over 300,000 visitors every year and attracts many west end shows—to modern collaborations such as Sunderland Culture.

Sunderland Culture, which has just celebrated its 10th anniversary, was founded by a collaboration of the University of Sunderland, Sunderland City Council and Sunderland Music Arts and Culture Trust. It has delivered programmes in the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art at the National Glass Centre and, most recently, the new Fire Station theatre—the opening of which I had the privilege of attending. It is a stunning auditorium space that has created a home for many of the talented performers of Sunderland. More importantly, it has redeveloped a former fire station, which was a heritage building so has attracted heritage funding. It is beautiful to see that the bars and restaurant attached to the new auditorium are actually the former fire station.

The father of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) used to work in that fire station, so it is particularly special when he visits.

The Fire Station theatre has already been host to a range of incredible events, and half of those who have come to visit the venue have been from outside the city. That boosts the local economy by bringing people into the city centre who are going to the bars and restaurants and bringing revenue. In the first four years of its existence, Sunderland Culture can boast that the city has attracted 3.5 million visitors to its venues and programmes. It has helped to host over 1,000 exhibitions, performances and events in the city and online, seen almost 40,000 school visits to cultural venues and had over 150,000 participants of all ages. That is truly an incredible achievement.

The cultural investment in the city does not stop there. We currently have the Sunderland Festival of Light down by the seafront and in Roker park—not the former football ground, but the Victorian park. There are ongoing projects, such as Culture House, a project for learning and creating that will sit in the very centre of the city. Yesterday, we also had a formal announcement of a huge new project in the city. Pallion Engineering announced that it had made a planning application for the development of a huge new production space at Pallion shipyard on the banks of the Wear. This is a sensitive subject for people in Sunderland, as we have a long history of shipbuilding in our city, but the river has changed. Many buildings have been built and the possibility of building ships on our river went when the shipyards were closed by the Government in 1988-89. Tyne and Wear Development Company, which did not need planning permission under the Thatcher and Major Governments, was created. That meant many buildings were built on our riverside, making it impossible to build ships again on our river unless buildings were pulled down. Sadly, although I totally understand the emotion of wanting to bring shipbuilding back to our city, it is not realistically possible. The opportunities in that area with offshore wind and refitting are better placed at our port, a little further down the river.

The building that is the subject of the planning permission application was built in the 1970s and closed in 1989 for building ships, although there has been fabrication work there since then. The history and the new production space are both incredible testaments to the history of our city and its contribution to the world, and also an example of the city's future. The plans are for 500,000 square feet of creative space, maintaining the existing huge structures, with plans to have the largest covered water studio in the world. That will be a huge thing not just for Sunderland and the north-east, but for the country. There is the potential for creating 1,000 new jobs. Although during the second world war, we were the most productive city in the number of ships built, we can once again be a world leader, with the biggest water studio in the world.

Although developments are in their early stages, the plans are being led by production company Metalwork Pictures USA, Broadwick Live, Pallion Engineering and Kajima Corporation of Japan. This is a great opportunity for regeneration of an area that needs it. It is a great opportunity for the growth of our creative sector and a perfect opportunity for the development of skills and training in the local area. The wheels are already in motion in some of these areas, most notably



by the opening last year of Fulwell 73's new office in the University of Sunderland. An organisation co-founded by Sunderland-born Leo Pearlman, it has produced an incredible list of films, TV series, adverts and music videos, not least the famous Netflix series "Sunderland 'Til I Die" about our beloved football club. It is an incredibly welcome addition to the cultural ecosystem of the city, and forms part of a commitment to upskilling and reskilling in the city. That forms part of a plan to ensure that the sector continues to grow. The transferable nature of skills that have been learned in industry or in apprenticeships over to the creative sector is huge. The latest developments by big production companies provide new opportunities for local people to train and work in the creative industries.

I must also pay tribute to North East Screen, a film agency supporting local productions, helping to drive local talent. It supports incoming productions by connecting companies with crews, filming locations and a host of other north-east creatives, helping to develop the many broadcasting projects coming to the region. Last month, for example, an initiative promoting opportunities for comedy creators was announced, as the first development opportunity of its kind, giving comedy creators in the area the chance to pitch their ideas to the BBC, and gain support in bringing their projects to life. The BBC also announced £25 million investment in the region, drawing on partnerships with local authorities, working together to create growth in skills, talent and creative industry infrastructure.

The importance of public service broadcasting and its commitment to regional programming cannot be overestimated. This is another example of its benefits, in addition to the increased allocation of Arts Council funding for the 2023-26 investment round announced last week. I must at this point praise the commitment to our city from Darren Henley, who is regularly a visitor to our city. In fact, in Select Committee, he has said, "I love Sunderland."

I believe that the success that we have seen in Sunderland and the wider region and the very good examples of collaboration will be for the benefit of the creative industries as a whole, but there is undoubtedly still much more work to do. Although local partnerships are flourishing and we are finding investment through private initiatives such as the one proposed at Pallion shipyards, per capita investment for Sunderland remains well below that for equivalent cities. There is a long way to go on the levelling up to which the Government are committed, to balance investment across the country.

I would like to ask the Minister today about Government support for skills and training to support the sector in Sunderland, the north-east and, indeed, the wider country. I am aware that there is a cross-over in responsibility between Departments, but I believe that it is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's responsibility to make the case for the cultural and creative sectors to those other Departments. I look forward to a commitment on that issue from the Minister today, to ensure that the growth is sustained, that local people have access to the new opportunities that my city is gaining and that the benefits of the growth are shared. I also ask the Minister what plans she has to support the growth of the creative industries as a whole in the region, to ensure that schemes that bring vital boosts to the local economy are successful and have the support to be sustainable contributors to local economic growth.

What plans do the Government have to support arts training programmes, and to support young people entering the sector? Reskilling and retraining for those already well versed in skills such as construction and those trained as electricians—accountants are in demand in this area as well—is an extremely valuable resource for the creative sector. We need to look not just at bringing people through school, education, higher education and so on, but at some of those transferable skills that, with small tweaks and small training programmes, could be very effective in this area. The University of Sunderland has done an incredible job, now in collaboration with Fulwell 73, to provide an extremely high-quality training programme for young people, but the number of students starting arts courses has fallen in the last 10 years. That simply must be rectified. The value and contribution, and the potential, of the sector must be recognised.

Covid-related issues are ongoing. Many freelancers in this area of work went on to find other jobs at the height of the pandemic, because they slipped through the net of a lot of the support that was available. They have left the industry and are not coming back. We need, and the Government need, to look to see whether that can be addressed to encourage some of those people back with the opportunities that are available.

Some incredible projects have been launched in Sunderland recently, and there is potential from yesterday's announcement, but there is still a lot of work to do. I look forward to the Minister getting behind the growth in the region's drive to grow its creative and cultural sector, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say.

11.13 am

**The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for securing a really important debate. It is a great opportunity to showcase her tremendous region, and she has very cleverly articulated just how much vibrancy and life the arts can breathe into parts of her city that have previously fallen into disrepair or where there were industries that have declined. I had the pleasure of spending some time with my family on holiday in the north-east not so long ago, and I saw the amazing contribution of heritage and the arts to the vibrancy of the region.

I was glad recently to present to the hon. Lady's Committee; she is a very engaged member of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. We spoke on local journalism, and I hope to write to the Committee shortly in order to update it on some of the conversations that I have had specifically with the BBC on the local democracy reporting service, which it provides. She is a stalwart supporter of the creative industries, and I am grateful for her passionate campaigning on behalf of the sector but also the place that she represents. I congratulate Sunderland on being chosen as the national e-sports performance campus by British Esports this year. I was really interested in the water studios project that the hon. Lady spoke about. It sounds absolutely incredible, and I am keen to hear more about it as it develops.

The hon. Lady is right to be so supportive of the creative industries. They are an economic powerhouse: they contribute almost £116 billion to the country's

[*Julia Lopez*]

economy and employ more than 2 million people throughout the country. Although the north-east may not have some of the biggest clusters of creative businesses, the sector there employs about 45,000 people and contributes £1.1 billion to the economy. It is built on a foundation of venues big and small, from the Forum music centre in Darlington to the Sage Gateshead in Newcastle. The Government are committed to supporting creative businesses. We supported them through the pandemic, and we are now trying to help them with future growth, because it is such an important sector to the economy.

As the hon. Lady may be aware, we are developing a creative sector vision, and we will set out our 2030 ambitions to drive even more growth and employment in those world-renowned creative industries. At the heart of that vision is £50 million of investment from our Department to drive growth across the country through the Create Growth programme, the UK games fund and the UK global screen fund. In addition, UK Research and Innovation is providing more than £100 million of funding for the Circular Fashion programme, the CoSTAR virtual production infrastructure programme and the Creative Catalyst scheme. Those investments demonstrate our commitment to supporting the industries across the UK.

As the Minister for those industries, I am always looking for new opportunities to encourage growth. On Friday, I announced the six regions that will receive funding from our £17.5 million Create Growth programme. I am pleased to say that that includes the north-east, which will be getting £1.28 million in grant funding. That will allow businesses to access a further £7 million investment fund and support to build local investor networks. Working with Innovate UK, the North of Tyne Combined Authority will collaborate with local and industry partners, including New Writing North, North East Screen, which the hon. Lady mentioned, and Creative UK to develop a bespoke package tailored to the needs of local creative businesses.

The hon. Lady rightly asked about skills. I have been advocating that agenda across the Government, working very closely with the Department for Education. We are lucky that our new Secretary of State has deep experience in the education space.

I am always keen to show that creative careers are a stable and fulfilling choice for young people, contrary to the stereotype that parents might have about them. From directors to designers, cameramen, creative technicians and, as the hon. Lady says, accountants, there are many exciting careers in the creative industries, which can be very lucrative. To target young people from under-represented backgrounds, we will relaunch the Creative Careers programme to raise awareness of the wide range of exciting careers that those industries can offer. I am pleased to say that parts of the north-east are included in our 53 priority areas, where we will be delivering this programme with our industry partner, ScreenSkills.

Getting a new generation of talent into the creative workforce is absolutely vital if we are to mitigate the reported skills gaps and shortages in the sector. A lot of people in the sector speak to me about them regularly.

We also recognise the importance of providing opportunities for current workers to upskill and retrain. The hon. Lady spoke about those in the construction industry.

There is a range of technical education pathways available to enhance the skills of the creative workforce, and I am pleased to say that we have been developing a range of new qualifications that will be on the horizon, from creative T-levels in 2023 to creative higher technical qualifications in 2025. They will provide people with high-quality vocational skills training and work experience from the age of 16.

Of course, apprenticeships also play a very important role in upskilling and retraining. There are now five Government-funded apprenticeship pilots under way. We are testing new, more flexible approaches to that training pathway for our industries. It has been a particular challenge to get an apprenticeship that fits the creative industries, which use freelance work, so it can be quite difficult to get the right placements. That includes the northern apprenticeship pilot, which will be trialling 60 flexible apprenticeships across the cultural and creative organisations in the north.

The hon. Lady also spoke about the importance of BBC investment. That supplements what we are doing in the north-east. For instance, as she said, last year the BBC announced investment of £25 million in the north-east, which will support the creation of more jobs and more regionally made independent programmes. The Department recognises that the creative industries in the north-east have an enormous amount to offer, and we are dedicated to nurturing that. She also talked about the importance of public service broadcasters; we are developing a range of reforms to support our PSBs legislatively.

I also pay tribute to the great work of the British Film Institute. Through its delivery of national lottery funding between 2017 and 2022, it has played a really important role in reaching creative businesses and audiences in the north-east, delivering more than £2 million of funding in total. The north-east is just one region benefiting from what is a booming film industry, and it is great to hear some of the examples the hon. Lady has shared with us today.

I am proud and excited to say that creative industries are often at the forefront of innovative technology, with potential applications across the economy. I have recently enjoyed hearing about XR Therapeutics in Gateshead, a company that uses virtual reality to help people to conquer phobias. It was supported by UK Research and Innovation's healthy ageing challenge to push those immersive technologies in the healthcare sector. By using the latest digital technologies in creative ways, the creative industries are trailblazers in delivering the social, economic and environmental benefits that come from innovation.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council's £70 million CoSTAR programme is also open for applications. The programme seeks to support researchers in developing new technologies such as virtual production and many more applications. I very much encourage businesses in the north-east to look at that fantastic opportunity so that they can be much more involved in this cutting-edge work.

I recognise that, as the hon. Lady mentioned, this has not been an easy time for creative businesses. We are still working to recover after the pandemic, and the

sector faced particularly difficult challenges. Although some were able to make it into an opportunity for innovation, others were not in a position to do so. The coronavirus job retention scheme did a good job at protecting the vast majority of businesses across the country, supporting just under 60,000 employees in the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors. We also supported freelancers directly through the self-employment income support scheme, which received about 312,000 claims from self-employed people in the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors.

The Government went above and beyond that, investing in some 5,000 organisations through the culture recovery fund, which supported both commercial and non-commercial organisations, including venues such as the Auxiliary Project Space in Middlesbrough. The fund also indirectly supported freelancers by helping to ensure the survival and operations of the organisations with which many freelancers work.

On Friday, DCMS also announced that the Arts Council has kicked off its latest round of long-term investment to help creative industries grow in the regions. I am glad to hear the hon. Lady speak so positively about Darren Henley. We have been working hard to try to spread Arts Council England funding across the regions, and it is great to hear that the hon. Lady's region has benefited. As she will be aware, we have had new investment in Sunderland Central, with the Arts Council offering annual funding of £230,000 to Southpaw Dance Company and increasing its investment in Sunderland Culture, which runs a number of organisations including the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art.

The north-east is undeniably a real hub of activity and I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting the work in her area. The north-east would not be the dynamic, innovative place that it is without advocates like her, in this House and beyond. Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen has been an inspiration, working with the combined authority cabinet to develop a £16.5 million programme for the long-term recovery of creative and visitor sectors

in Teesside. The pandemic has shown that we need creative content in our lives more than ever, and that brilliant package helped many businesses to survive a very difficult time.

I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate and providing an opportunity to showcase her fantastic city and all its thriving arts organisations. It is important that we continue to highlight regions like hers that are working hard to make a tremendous difference to people's lives. The north-east in particular sets a fantastic example for other local authorities in how to support local creative industries. I am also grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's extensive programme of support for the arts and creative industries in the north-east and across the country.

Of course, I am aware of how difficult the pandemic was for many creative workers and how it has resulted in some people leaving the sector. We are aware of that, and we are trying to develop ways to get people back because of the severe skills shortage that the hon. Lady has referenced. I truly think, though, that the best way to bring those people back is to generate growth in the industries. That is why we are focusing a lot of our efforts on that, so that people understand the valuable job opportunities there are and the fact that they can have very fulfilling, exciting careers.

That is why, as I have set out in my speech, the Government are investing millions to support creative businesses' growth ambitions. I firmly believe that these investments, combined with our work with the sector, will develop the right training opportunities and ensure that our creative industries and creative workers are able to thrive. I look forward to continuing to work with partners in the north-east, including the hon. Lady, to support an absolutely fantastic sector and look at further opportunities for creative businesses in the region.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.24 am

*Sitting suspended.*



## Nature and Climate Declaration

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for a nature and climate declaration.

Sir James, I am not sure—

**James Gray (in the Chair)**: Order. This is the second week in which people keep addressing me as “Sir James”; unfortunately, Her Majesty did not knight me, so I am just Mr Gray, if that is all right.

**Derek Thomas**: Sorry, Mr Gray; I exceeded my area of responsibility.

I am not sure that I have brought any subject to the House without having been petitioned by a constituent. In this instance, I have been petitioned by many of my constituents and by many town and parish councils. They have urged me to raise the issue of nature and climate, and they have been particularly keen to secure my backing for the nature and climate declaration.

I do know for sure what my fellow parliamentarians got up to over the weekend, but I suspect that many of us attended church services in our constituencies to mark the beginning of COP27. I was pleased to join members of the congregation at Madron church on Saturday afternoon as the church bells were rung out to welcome COP27. The service began with a reading of an old and simple psalm:

“The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.”

It seems to me that those words are a helpful reminder that we are simply caretakers and guardians of the planet we are so fortunate to live on.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate at a time when the United Nations are meeting in Egypt for COP27. I am pleased to contribute, in some small way, to the effort to get back on track on the road to net zero following the severe disruption of the covid pandemic, the race to build back after it, and the current devastating impact of Russia’s evil war against Ukraine and the resulting global crisis in energy and food security.

This debate and the declaration itself support efforts to deliver on a commitment that we made in the Paris agreement, which was ratified in 2016. We committed to affirm

“the importance of education, training, public awareness, public participation, public access to information and co-operation at all levels on the matters addressed in this Agreement.”

I thank the Zero Hour team, who have built up support for the nature and climate declaration over the past month. I particularly thank Ron, who cannot be here today due to traffic and transport difficulties, but I also thank Amy and Oliver, who are here; it has been such a pleasure to work with them. Their hard graft prepared the ground for the launch of the nature and climate declaration in this place last week.

This is democracy at its best, because the nature and climate declaration has been signed by nearly 2,000 UK politicians from all parties, including more than 1,500 councillors. The first of its kind, the all-party declaration

has been signed by councillors, elected mayors, peers, MPs and Members of the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies. It recognises and supports the UK Government’s efforts on climate change and biodiversity, and recommends that the UK Government deal with what it calls the critical environmental risks to Britain’s heritage, communities and future prosperity by doing three things: fulfilling our fair share of emissions reductions to meet the 1.5°C target; reversing nature loss by 2030; and delivering an integrated environmental protection and decarbonisation plan. I take this issue and the declaration seriously for a number of reasons, not least because all three recommendations are in line with UK Government policy and should therefore be welcomed and accepted by the Minister.

British citizens understand that there needs to be a shift towards a healthier and greener way of life—in fact, when I stood for election in 2019, that was the idea I stood on: to work for a healthier and greener west Cornwall—but they also recognise that this aim needs to be achieved both at home and abroad. We all recognise that we have a part to play; the problem is that net zero and 2050 are not expressions that particularly resonate with the average human being, although most people want us to treat the planet better than we do now and few would deny the sizeable benefits for everyone if we focused a little more on what nature recovery actually looks like and how efforts to decarbonise will improve day-to-day living.

In recent years the Government and Parliament have made great strides in getting to grips with the sheer challenge and opportunity of delivering on environmental protection and decarbonisation, but we have failed to clearly articulate what this means for our constituents. We get too hung up on what we mean by net zero by 2050 and do not talk nearly enough about the positive benefits of improving our homes, or about the creation of the skills to do that and of skills in farming and clean energy. We do not talk nearly enough about how important farms are for food production that enhances nature and captures carbon. We do not talk nearly enough about how energy can be secure and affordable if we use a natural resource such as underground heat, the sun, the wind and tide-generated energy.

That is why I want to briefly concentrate my thoughts on how delivering on the declaration’s three recommendations is not about inflicting hardship, or placing a straitjacket on our constituencies and communities, but rather about delivering levelling up in real terms—levelling up in skills, health equality, food and energy security, mental wellbeing, and knowledge and educational attainment. I will set out how the integration of environmental protections and decarbonisation will deliver those public benefits.

When we have debated net zero previously, we have tended to alienate farmers by somehow blaming them for our carbon footprint and loss of biodiversity. I agree that over recent decades we have hungered for cheap food at the expense of the natural environment. From visiting farms in west Cornwall, however, I know that it is not just possible to do food production, enhancing the natural environment and decarbonisation in harmony; they are mutually dependent. There is not time to go into the full detail now, but the use of herbal leys, tree planting and cattle grazing has led to enriched biodiversity, improved soil health and reduced run-off.

Farms that work with nature have an immense potential for productivity and high-quality food while securing resilience in the landscape and creating a robust environment that will cope better with climate change. Farming with nature can reduce reliance on imported inputs and rebuild biodiversity by creating habitats and space for nature at scale. Farming with nature builds complexity and diversity in denuded farmland, which can sequester vast amounts of carbon and create opportunities for education, community and social recovery.

There has been considerable debate recently about food security and the Government's intention in relation to the environmental land management scheme. For what it is worth, I would fully support the Government if they decided to channel a far greater share of ELM towards our farms to support food production, environmental health, environmental protection, decarbonisation and food security, but there are other ways to rapidly increase environmental protection and decarbonisation hand in hand. For example, there is an ambition to ramp up clean energy and clean heating, as we heard earlier from the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions.

Cornwall is fast becoming known for geothermal, which has the potential to generate energy for Britain's homes. Sadly, because of the way the Government organise their contracts for difference auction, emerging renewable energy technologies such as geothermal, and to an extent floating offshore wind, are not getting a fighting chance. I am aware that those developing the geothermal potential have submitted written evidence to the Government's recent call for evidence. They suggest avenues for supporting geothermal that include a new deep geothermal renewable heat incentive, a ringfenced pot for geothermal in the fifth CfD auction round, and significant reform to the current planning process. I am hopeful that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will look carefully at the case being made for emerging renewable technologies.

Cornwall is also leading the way on community ground-source heating. Kensa, a world-leading Cornish company, has now completed ground array installations for the first private retrofit street. Residents' properties will benefit from low-cost ground-source heating, which does not require gas or oil.

In my job I am privileged, as many of us are, to see all sorts of examples of how we can integrate environmental protection with decarbonisation. I focus particularly on food and energy, which is where the pressure on households is today. I cannot tell Members how keen farmers and businesses in my constituency are to access support to clad their barns, warehouses and workshops with solar panels and to install battery storage. Penzance dry dock, which is also represented in the Public Gallery, is the UK's oldest working dry dock and builds and retrofits ships and boats for maritime demands. That is an energy-intensive industry that looks to the Government to enable clean energy solutions in buildings and workshops.

The Government have nothing to fear from the declaration. Our communities are ahead in many ways. For example, Penzance Town Council recently committed to the future generations pledge, ensuring that every decision made, at every level, passes the good ancestor test that asks how each decision benefits our children's children and makes their lives at least as good as our own.

There is so much more I would like to include in my speech, but I do not get any impression that the Government lack ambition or commitment in this policy area. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said as much on Monday at COP27, and reiterated it in the Chamber this afternoon. He said:

"The world came together in Glasgow with one last chance to create a plan that would limit global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees...By honouring the pledges we made in Glasgow, we can turn our struggle against climate change into a global mission for new jobs and clean growth. And we can bequeath our children a greener planet and a more prosperous future. That's a legacy we could be proud of."

The UK Government are, though, rightly under pressure to deliver on their commitment and assurances. It would be remiss of me not to refer to the fact that the Government missed their own deadline for publishing the legally binding targets required by the Environment Act 2021. Will the Minister give an indication of when we can expect those targets to be published?

Another frustration for Members in this place is that Government Departments do not necessarily work together towards the same goals. The Climate Change Committee has been instrumental in highlighting the issue and setting targets for each Department; however, we recognise that inconsistency across Government is a risk to achieving environment protection and decarbonisation.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** The hon. Gentleman touches on the crucial point that the delivery of our targets is not on track because we are missing co-ordination within Government. Is it not time to bring back the Department of Energy and Climate Change to co-ordinate the delivery of our net zero targets?

**Derek Thomas:** There is a Committee in No. 10 that does that job, but I accept the hon. Lady's point.

On Radio 4 last week, as I was driving back to Cornwall, Lord Deben said that we have some of the best, world-leading targets but are lagging behind in delivering on them. As I hinted at in relation to offshore winds, which affect the Celtic sea off Cornwall, Devon and Wales in particular, and in respect of the challenges around geothermal and new technologies, we need cross-Governmental work to ensure that nothing stands in the way for no good reason. On intervention by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), it would be great if the Minister could outline what joint departmental work is taking place on these intertwined issues, especially between BEIS and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Finally, will the Minister meet me, the team from Zero Hour and other interested colleagues in this place? There is so much that Members from throughout the House can do to support the Government to deliver what has been committed and to improve the way we inform and take the public with us, as we pledged in the Paris agreement. There is a real opportunity to take the public with us so that they can see the positives of what I have briefly set out this afternoon. The declaration gives us a renewed opportunity to commit to working together to achieve what we all know is fundamental to our constituents in relation to skills, health equality, food and energy security, mental wellbeing and knowledge. It is the least they deserve from their elected representatives.

2.44 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this incredibly important debate; I was interested to hear about what is happening in his constituency.

As we all know, the need to act on climate change is urgent. Extreme weather events over the summer saw the UK endure record temperatures of more than 40°C for the first time—something the Met Office described as “virtually impossible” without human-induced climate change. Recently, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy urged the Government to get a grip on the major national security risks posed by the effects of climate change on critical national infrastructure such as that for power, transport, water and communications. Its note reported an extreme weakness at the centre of Government when it comes to tackling climate change.

Earlier this week at COP27, the UN Secretary-General gave a stark warning that humanity is on what he called “a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator”.

He said:

“We are in the fight of our lives and we are losing...our planet is fast approaching tipping points that will make climate chaos irreversible.”

With that in mind, it is disappointing that the Prime Minister saw COP27 as something of an afterthought and initially decided not to attend, only to be shamed into a U-turn. He did go—that is something—but it was very disappointing that he had to be forced. It is so vital that the Government now address the climate emergency with real urgency. I note the Prime Minister’s statement in the House today, but I point out to the Minister that there are glaring inconsistencies in his current position. I would like her to respond to the points I am going to make.

It was the Prime Minister who, as Chancellor, introduced the energy profits levy that allowed energy companies to shield 91p of every £1 of their profits from the levy by investing those profits in fossil fuel extraction. The promotion of fossil fuel extraction instead of investment in renewables is irresponsible as we face the climate emergency—it is an insult to young people and future generations. Of course, in addition to that, the Prime Minister is still committed to the ban on onshore wind which, again, given the urgency of the emergency we face, makes no sense.

I was proud to support the Labour motion in May 2019 that led to the UK Parliament being the first in the world to declare an environment and climate emergency. It was incredibly disappointing that Conservative Members abstained on that vote. Labour’s green prosperity plan would establish a national wealth fund and GB Energy, a publicly owned energy company, to invest in the technologies of the future. The policy would create 1 million new jobs in towns and cities in every corner of the country and bring down energy bills, raise living standards and ensure that Britain shows global leadership in tackling the climate crisis.

Labour also has a clear plan to insulate 19 million homes throughout the country to help to cut people’s energy bills and emissions. Home insulation rates and energy efficiency upgrades have plummeted since the Conservative party took office more than 10 years ago.

Why have Conservative Governments decided to slow down on home insulation? We need to see a reversal of this. I urge the Minister to set out what plans they have to get the UK insulated.

I pay tribute to the Cool Places of Worship programme in Wirral, through which places of worship are taking action on climate change as part of Cool 2, Wirral’s climate change strategy. West Kirby United Reformed Church in my constituency is part of the programme and is doing some really interesting and exciting work. I congratulate the church on its recent event to share knowledge about how people can improve the insulation of their homes and tackle climate change, because it is incredibly important that that expert information is shared with people.

Recent research by the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit found that poorly insulated homes will have to pay almost £1,000 more on average than others on their energy bills this winter. Why are the Government not insulating homes on the scale Labour has outlined? The nature and climate declaration that put forward by the campaign group Zero Hour calls for the Government to ensure that the UK fulfils our fair share of emissions reductions to ensure that the average global temperature increase will not exceed 1.5°.

The Government’s October 2021 net zero strategy points to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that shows that

“if we fail to limit global warming to 1.5°C...floods and fires...will get more frequent and more fierce, crops will be more likely to fail, and sea levels will rise driving mass migration as millions are forced from their homes. Above 1.5°C we risk reaching climatic tipping points...meaning we could lose control of our climate for good.”

What do the Government intend to do to ensure that the UK plays its part in doing all we can to keep below 1.5°?

Turning to the attack on nature, I pay tribute to the campaign by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. We know that there is an urgent need to protect and restore nature. As the RSPB has said:

“We need immediate action from the UK Government to halt the plans which threaten our water, air, beaches and rivers. Nature cannot wait. We need the UK Government to halt their attack on nature, now.”

The chief executive officer of the RSPB said that

“this is not the time to be pushing forward with destructive legislation that will remove vital wildlife protections and threaten nature’s recovery.”

She has called for the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill to be stopped right now, for an end to the attack on nature and for the Prime Minister to set out an ambitious plan for tackling the nature and climate emergency. She is absolutely right.

The Wildlife Trusts have raised serious concerns that, through the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, we could see the loss of important protections for nature, including habitat regulations. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will soon return to the Commons, bringing with it further risks to environmental protections. The Government have an immense responsibility in the face of the climate emergency and the environmental breakdown that we are experiencing. I call on them to introduce a bold and urgent plan to address the climate emergency, to change course and to drop their attack on nature.



2.50 pm

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate. Like him, I have been urged by constituents to show my support for this declaration. Like him, I welcome the strong support from church groups.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was at Worcester cathedral, meeting the cathedral's eco-group. It was holding a fantastic green fair at which it showcased ideas for sustainable living, green skills and education, and better ways of dealing with food and energy waste. The declaration mentions, as did my hon. Friend, the importance of education and training. During my all too brief period as Schools Minister, I was proud to put the COP26 Education Ministers meeting on the agenda of the international forum for the teaching profession, thereby ensuring our attendance. I was proud to introduce the natural history GCSE, which had cross-party support in this House. I was strongly urged to do so by pupils in Nunnery Wood High School and Stanley Road Primary School in my constituency. I contributed to the Department for Education's sustainability and climate change strategy, and it was great to stand alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) and Bear Grylls at the Natural History Museum for its launch. I took the opportunity to visit schools that were providing strong environmental education, such as North Worcester Primary Academy in my constituency. It is part of The Rivers CofE Multi Academy Trust, which has rewritten its entire curriculum around the sustainable development goals. That is well worth looking at and learning from.

Today we have had the Prime Minister's statement on COP27, showing that the UK continues to lead actively in this space. I was pleased to hear him say that there is no solution to climate change without protecting and nurturing nature. That has got to be right, and we understand that in the declaration. It is vital that we protect the natural environment, meaning not only the global natural environment—some of the work that the UK has done to protect our oceans is world-leading—but our domestic natural environment, through campaigning against litter in all our constituencies, campaigning to support biodiversity, and ensuring that the UK reaches the highest environment standards.

I was pleased when the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), announced that the Office for Environmental Protection would be headquartered in my Worcester constituency. In fact, it will be located very close to the Worcester woods, a fantastic area that preserves the natural environment. Although at the time Labour Front Benchers decried the decision to locate this institution in Worcester, I hope that by now they have changed their mind and realise, like Dame Glenys Stacey and me, that Worcester is an excellent location.

We are a city that has its fair share of flood risk, so we are very aware of the impact of climate change on flooding, and of the importance of nature and the natural environment in avoiding flooding. Trees do important work, particularly when planted in the upland areas that affect flooding on the River Severn, as does high-quality soil. On a visit with the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, I remember discussing the importance of soil porosity,

which is supported by healthy, live soil, to avoiding flooding. I urge the Government, as I did at DEFRA questions a couple of weeks ago, to continue to engage with the Wildlife Trusts on the future of environmental land management schemes, and to support biodiversity through a strong British agriculture policy, which should play to some of the unique assets of our country, such as its hedgerows and ancient native woodlands.

I am proud of the work being undertaken in my constituency by the so-called WEG—the Worcester Environmental Group—which works with Worcester City Council and our county to support more biodiverse verges and roundabouts, and to create a fantastic new nature trail, which is linking Worcester's primary schools with a circuit of green lanes, taking in some of the city's oases of green space and areas for outdoor activity.

I praise all those in my urban constituency who help to create space for nature and think about how to support biodiversity. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk at today's PMQs about the opportunities provided by offshore floating wind. Alongside wider investment in renewables, nuclear—which is a low-carbon technology—and hydrogen technology, that can play an important part in our journey to achieve net zero.

I agree with the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) that we need to do more on insulation. That was one reason why I supported my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) in both of the last two leadership campaigns—because he spoke about the importance of insulation during those debates. I hope that the Government he leads will come forward with more measures on that front.

Finally, as we rightly pursue the green technologies of the future, we need to be careful that we do so in a clear-headed way, which will allow our constituents to afford their energy bills and heat their homes effectively. I am concerned by the Government's policy to encourage the complete electrification of heating, given that many of our constituents live in homes that are not yet energy efficient enough to be effectively heated by electric heating and heat pumps. I declare a constituency interest in representing one of the largest boiler manufacturers in the country, but I hope that the Government will explore carefully the opportunities for zero-carbon technologies to heat with gas, including the potential use of hydrogen. That could be an important part of the mix if we want both to keep our constituents' homes warm and to move towards net zero.

2.57 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing this crucial debate and setting the scene.

I hope you will forgive me, Mr Gray, for quoting again what António Guterres said this week:

"We are on the highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator."

The world is on course for a 2.8°C temperature rise by the end of this century. Without taking action now, the 1.5°C target is unreachable, and complacency is the biggest danger we face.

Unfortunately, the UK Government are not acting with the necessary urgency. We are setting a lot of targets and having lots of plans, but we do not deliver

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

on them. The Government have proven themselves to be climate action delayers. When the new Prime Minister was Chancellor, he cut air passenger duty on domestic flights and introduced a windfall tax that incentivised firms to invest in fossil fuel extraction. And our Prime Minister had to be dragged to the COP 27 summit this week. He was asked only today whether he would lift the de facto veto on onshore wind, but he did not answer the question. That gives rise to the question: what is this Government about?

We have just heard that we need to find solutions that are affordable. The most affordable solution for renewables is onshore wind, not nuclear. We heard last week that Sizewell C might be scrapped because it is too expensive. If the Government were serious about investing in renewables and doing it cheaply, onshore wind is surely the most obvious solution. The blindfold worn by Conservative Members is beyond my understanding.

The climate emergency is a problem not just for future generations. It is having a material impact on people now. We have seen extreme weather events cause suffering, conflict and destruction around the world—from droughts in east Africa, to bush fires in Australia. If we exceed 1.5°C, floods and fires will become more frequent and intense. Crops are more likely to fail and millions will be driven from their homes. Some politicians treat this 1.5°C target as being like a bus that can be missed because we can catch another one. We cannot miss this target. We have to keep global temperatures to less than 1.5°C or we face catastrophic climate breakdown.

The Government's net zero strategy recognises the danger of not meeting the 1.5°C target. The Government themselves acknowledge that we might miss the target. Their own plans do not even guarantee that we will hit it, given that their chance of success is just over 50%. Our own targets, in our developed nation, might not succeed. Our Government are taking major risks with the lives of people across the world. The Government know the dangers, yet they refuse to act at the necessary pace and with the necessary focus, as shown by their refusal to lift the veto on offshore wind. It is as if there is always something else that might be more important. No, the climate emergency is now and it is the most important issue on which our Government and Governments worldwide need to focus.

Nature provides our best chance of mitigating climate change and its worst impacts, such as flooding and droughts. As nature declines, so does the quality of human life. Protecting ecosystems that regulate the climate or contain critical carbon stores, such as ice sheets, forests, peatlands, wetlands and the oceans, must be prioritised alongside cutting emissions.

The Government are not acting to protect nature as they should. The Natural History Museum has named the UK as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and current Government policy will do nothing to improve our standing. The Government have tried to deregulate environmental protections at every opportunity, and have failed to make halting and reversing biodiversity decline by 2030 a legally binding target. At this rate, the Government will miss their commitment to leave the environment in a better state than they found it. Once again, they are not matching words with action.

I fully support Zero Hour's nature and climate declaration, but it must be matched with more substantive action. The Government must consider supporting the Climate and Ecology Bill, which addresses the full extent of the climate and nature crisis in line with the most up-to-date science. The Bill sets out a whole-of-Government emergency plan to rapidly transition away from fossil fuels and reverse the destruction of nature. It would require the UK to do its fair share globally to cut its emissions and stay below 1.5°C of global warming. The Bill would also require the UK to reverse the destruction of the natural world, by committing the Government to restore and expand ecosystems and to ensure that nature is visibly and measurably recovering by 2030.

Will the Minister set out how the Government are measuring their ambitions and targets for 2030? We need a clear and transparent way of measuring whether we are actually delivering on what we say we want to deliver. The Government are in the driving seat, and we need answers from them.

To some, these plans might seem radical. However, radicalism is necessary in the face of the climate emergency. The time for inaction is over. This is one of our last opportunities for a decisive response. If Governments do not step up, we risk losing the battle to preserve nature and the climate.

3.4 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Grady, and I am glad to have caught your eye slightly spontaneously—clearly, there is space in the debate for further contributions. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. It is absolutely fantastic to see Government Members proposing debates on this topic, as there have been recent Westminster Hall debates in which the Government Benches have not been occupied. The hon. Gentleman spoke passionately about what his constituents have said to him. Other Members said the same, and I have definitely had that experience. That is testament to the power of constituents lobbying Members of Parliament, engaging with us, making those visits and inviting us along to the parish services, nature demonstrations and woodland walks.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the church services that have been held to mark COP27. That reminded me of the many church services and demonstrations—the entire range of civil society activities—that took place in Glasgow this time last year for COP26. People from Glasgow North and across the city were immensely proud to host that conference and welcome the whole world. The momentum that was generated there cannot be lost, which is why debates such as this are so important, particularly as it is taking place while COP27 is happening in Egypt.

Many constituents have asked me to sign the nature and climate declaration, and I have been very happy to do so and to work with Zero Hour and the other organisations promoting it. On several occasions, constituents have made the journey to London to speak at mass lobby events on the Climate and Ecology Bill. The attempt to take it through the House of Lords is generating a lot of momentum, and I really hope the Government pay attention to what is said in the upper House. Not all of us are fans of the fact that people can

be appointed for life to that place, but it has a role in the UK's constitution. If the Government are serious about protecting the UK's constitution, they need to show that they are taking the House of Lords seriously. When it debates issues such as this, it is important that the Government pay attention.

It is timely that this debate is happening during COP27. In the Chamber today, the Prime Minister was subject to some robust questioning from both sides of the House. One of the key points for the Minister to consider is that there is growing cross-party consensus not just about the need to tackle the climate emergency and the crisis facing nature, but about some of the steps that have to be taken. As we said in the debate that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) secured last week, if Members of the Conservative party want to come up with free market-based solutions to tackle the climate emergency and preserve ecology, that is fine, but the problem is that externalising pollution and damaging factors from the current economic system caused the climate emergency in the first place. We can debate how we reach the targets—that is fine—but we have to agree that the targets are absolutely necessary.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the best delivery mechanisms is local government, but the Government are not prepared to devolve power and resources to local authorities, which are often closest to the people and are where the best solutions can be found?

**Patrick Grady:** Yes, indeed, and a lot of local authorities are doing what they can. The city authority in Glasgow, having hosted COP, is determined to be a leader in reaching net zero and for Glasgow to become a net zero city. Many local authorities and devolved institutions have been way ahead of the Government in recognising and declaring a climate emergency. To date, we have not had a Minister accept at the Dispatch Box that the planet is facing climate emergency, and adopt that language. If the Minister were prepared to do that, that would be a helpful step forward.

**Mr Robin Walker:** A moment ago, the hon. Gentleman asked whether Conservative Members could come up with ways in which the private sector and the market can help, and I think that was a fair challenge. One of the positive legacies from Glasgow, which was mentioned in the Prime Minister's statement earlier today, was the international climate finance pledges, and private sector organisations have got involved in that. Does he agree that that is a better approach to engendering international progress on this issue and supporting developing countries than the suggestion from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) that we should be paying reparations to countries around the world for climate damage?

**Patrick Grady:** I think it is important that we address loss and damage. It is a question of climate justice, and this is a concept that the Scottish Government have embraced for many years. The reality is that those of us in the developed part of the world—western, liberal economies—have benefited from an industrialisation process that has led to the anthropogenic climate change we are experiencing. The effects of that climate change are being felt first and hardest in developing parts of

the world that have done the least to cause climate change. Whether people use the language of reparation, loss and damage or mitigation and adaptation, the reality is that it will have to be paid for.

Climate change is a reality that people have to adapt to. As we said in last week's debate, there are already significant population flows. The population flows that are coming to these islands are as nothing compared to what is happening with internal displacement of people in Africa and Asia. There are small island states that are simply not going to exist any more, but the people who live on them have to go and live somewhere, and that has to be paid for.

It is not necessarily helpful to get tied up in the language around how the finance is leveraged. There is absolutely a role for the private sector and private funding. I was very interested to attend, at last year's COP, events organised by the Global Ethical Finance Initiative, which spoke about how the private sector can ethically, effectively and sustainably leverage funding that helps businesses grow and develop but that also tackles precisely these challenges.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Last week, I asked the Leader of the House if we could have some progress on the pledge on accessing climate finance for poorer countries. She could not answer that question. I have asked for a debate. It would be great if we could have a statement from the Government on the progress on access to climate finance.

**Patrick Grady:** The hon. Member is absolutely right, and I would support a bid for such a debate—I might even notify the Chair in advance that I wish to speak, rather than popping up at random.

As the hon. Member says, it is all good and well making pledges—the Prime Minister spoke many times today about the £11.6 billion that has been pledged—but that money has to be disbursed. It has to be spent effectively, and that cannot be at the expense of other development projects. Climate funding and justice have always required additionality to pre-existing aid flows. Without that, we will go backwards on progress towards meeting the very sustainable development goals that the hon. Member for St Ives spoke about, which school pupils in his constituency, as in mine, are so concerned about.

This issue has to have implications for the Government's domestic agenda as well. The reality is that new coal and nuclear power stations are not a sustainable solution, nor a route to protecting climate or nature. In Scotland, we are very proud that 100% of our electricity requirements are generated by renewable sources. We want to continue to build on that as time goes on. That is why it is important that the UK Government, and indeed devolved Governments and local authorities, start developing a broader vision of a circular economy that has wellbeing at its heart. I am very relieved that the language of growth at all costs, which was briefly the mantra of the UK Government for 40 days or so from the start of September, has quietly disappeared. Infinite growth is simply not possible on a finite planet. While growth is an important indicator, it is not the only indicator of wellbeing, prosperity or success.

All those considerations have to fit into the Government's thinking. A cleaner, greener future is also a cheaper and safer future. I have heard from constituents who are



[Patrick Grady]

concerned that, in among the cost of living crisis and everything else that is going on in the world, some of these priorities—particularly those we heard about at COP26 last year—have begun to be forgotten. That is why the COP process is so important: we have that annual reminder, the whole of civil society is mobilised and Governments are motivated—including the latest Prime Minister. Actually, if we want to tackle the cost of living crisis, adopting a more sustainable approach to our energy use and our consumption of goods and so on will lead to a cheaper and safer future at the same time.

The fact that there is a certain amount of cross-party consensus behind the climate and nature declaration represents an opportunity for the Government. Support will be there for action that helps us meet our targets. The Government should recognise that and capitalise on it. The fact that we are having the debate during COP27 makes it particularly timely. We all look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

3.15 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate. I would not normally take part in such a debate, as my personal knowledge of the matter is quite small. However, I was grateful to him for mentioning things such as herbal leys and rewilding, because I listen to “The Archers” regularly. That keeps my nature and farming knowledge up to date.

In the shadow of COP26, Scotland continues to lead on nature restoration and climate targets. Scotland has the most progressive climate targets in the world, and has had for a while: delivering a just transition to net zero by 2045, with an ambitious interim target of a 75% reduction in emissions by 2030. Scotland was the first country in the world to declare a climate emergency, and the first to introduce a climate justice fund, which has a human rights focus on helping those in developing countries, who are most at risk from climate change, to tackle its effects on the frontline.

Scotland has made great progress on our net zero journey, such as in energy supply and waste management, but further emissions cuts will involve some genuinely difficult decisions for Scotland, with significant long-term investment and behaviour change. Our schools are also playing a leading role. I learn not just here but from my grandchildren what I should be doing and what the planet needs. The Scottish Government have been a world leader in renewable energy technologies, with onshore and offshore wind, hydropower and solar meeting the equivalent of 90% to 100% of Scotland’s energy demand. That is up from only 28% in 2009.

We are making progress but there will always be more to do. The Scottish Government’s biodiversity strategy aims to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and reverse it by 2045. They have also led an international coalition resulting in the Edinburgh declaration, which urges increased international action to tackle biodiversity loss. It now has 244 signatories from Governments, cities and local authorities representing every continent. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) emphasised the need for action not just at Government level but at local authority level.

During the last Parliament, the Scottish Government exceeded the First Minister’s commitment at COP21 in Paris to provide an extra £12 million to support projects in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda through our world-leading climate justice fund. Under the Scottish Government, the climate justice fund has trebled to £36 million over this Parliament, which aims to support those on the frontline of the climate crisis. That is in contrast to the global Britain espoused by this Tory UK Government, who have cut international aid. For example, the £3.2-million Climate Challenge Programme Malawi, which ran from 2017 to 2020, supported a select group of rural communities to identify and implement their own solutions to adapt to and build resilience against the worst effects of climate change. That contributes directly to many of the UN global goals, especially goal 13 on climate action.

The Scottish Government have provided support through their climate justice fund to not just Malawi, but to Zambia, Tanzania and Rwanda to train people in water resource management and resilience, to improve sustainable agricultural and irrigation systems, to plant 122,000 trees, to develop renewable forms of alternative farming and to fund clean drinking water initiatives. The SNP welcomed the UK Government’s climate justice fund that was announced at COP26, following the nine-year lead of the Scottish Government’s own fund.

As the world gathers in Egypt for COP27, the Scottish Government have been praised for their world-leading loss and damage funding support. At COP26 in Glasgow, they used Scotland’s role as the venue for the summit to support others in calling for action on loss and damage. Scotland became the first country in the world to make an explicit commitment to providing funding to address loss and damage in other nations. That happened 30 years on—30 years, Mr Gray!—from small island states first calling for a loss and damage fund.

Commitments followed from Wallonia, Denmark and philanthropy through the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, showing that there is recognition of the importance of the issue and an appetite to address it. The Scottish Government pledged £2 million from the climate justice fund to the project, jump-starting a further £17.5 million in funding from other Governments and civil society—a ninefold increase on the initial commitment.

Amid the flip-flopping over whether the Prime Minister would attend COP27 at all, the UK Government have not provided the \$280 million they pledged to the green climate fund or the \$20.6 million they pledged to the adaptation fund. Scotland leads the way in committing to loss and damage funding; it is time for the UK Government to step up.

Egypt’s COP27 presidency welcomed actions by Scotland and Denmark—two very small countries—as

“steps in the right direction”

on loss and damage. It encouraged other developed nations to follow their lead. Ahead of attending COP27, the First Minister said:

“For many countries, particularly in the global south, this must be the COP where the global north not only delivers on our promises to finance adaptation and mitigation, but recognises the need to address the loss and damage experienced by countries already impacted by climate change.”

She has committed to increasing that funding further in future.

At least 33 million Pakistanis have been directly affected by floods in rural and urban areas, after unprecedented torrential rain inundated almost a third of the country, breaking all records of mega-floods, with cumulative damages worth \$14.906 billion—I have trouble saying these figures, they are so big. If that is not a call to action, I do not know what is.

The First Minister has called it our “moral responsibility” finally to acknowledge the damage done by developed nations through emissions and to contribute to loss and damage funding. Yesterday, she pledged a further £5 million of funding for loss and damage caused by the climate crisis, such as the effects of sea-level rise or non-economic effects, including the loss of cultural identity. Importantly, the funding will be in the form of grants, rather than loans, ensuring that there is no additional debt burden for recipient countries. The process will be community-led and owned.

Loss and damage is now on the formal agenda for the first time. As the First Minister said,

“this COP can mark a turning point in ensuring the views, experiences and perspectives of the global south” are at the heart of negotiations.

The UK Government must commit—and act—to restore nature and decelerate the climate catastrophe. Scotland has asked the UK Government to increase their ambition on decarbonisation of the electricity grid and gas network and to immediately confirm support for carbon capture, usage and storage. The UK Government have not yet responded positively to those requests. Such changes would support both the UK and Scotland to meet their emission reduction targets.

The House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee stated in a report last month:

“Behaviour change is essential for achieving climate and environment goals, and for delivering wider benefits.”

It stated:

“The Government’s current approach to enabling behaviour change to meet climate and environment goals is inadequate to meet the scale of the challenge.”

That is from the House of Lords.

The UK Government must incentivise instead of cutting electric vehicle access schemes such as England’s electric vehicle grant system, which has been further downgraded from £5,000 in 2011 to £1,500 in 2022. In balancing their budgets, the UK Government might subject electric and zero-emission vehicles to vehicle excise duty, which is a huge worry. The majority of fossil-fuel buses in Scotland will be removed by next year and will be replaced by green buses that are free to use for all under-22s and over-65s. In fact, the Serjeant at Arms picked up my bus pass from the Floor of the Chamber for me only last night. Scotland’s scheme is a positive way to encourage the use of public transport. Despite the Scottish Government’s achievements, the UK Government have cut bus decarbonisation funding by half, with local authorities warning that up to a third of English bus services are at risk of being scrapped. Public transport must not be sacrificed to balance the books.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I note the hon. Lady’s remarks about bus fares. In the Liverpool city region, the metro Mayor, Steve Rotherham, has introduced the £2 fare, which is having a fantastic impact on the way people

travel, because it makes things so much more affordable. Does she agree that we need to see a lot more of that around the country?

**Marion Fellows:** Absolutely. If people use public transport and not their cars, that is a really good way to cut emissions, but the cost of public transport has been rising for quite a long time.

The evidence from Scotland’s rail electrification programme is clear: having a strategic plan on decarbonisation and sticking to it means more efficient and cheaper electrification schemes. The cost of electrification in Scotland is 33% lower per route-kilometre than in England. The electrification schemes recently announced for Scotland’s railway will mean the introduction of even more decarbonised journeys across the Borders, Fife and the Lothians, and the roll-out of innovative battery electric units to accelerate the move to a net zero railway. That must be followed by the UK Government.

A Public Accounts Committee report released last Wednesday states that the UK Government’s commitment that the public sector should “lead by example” in moving to net zero is not being met. It highlighted the poor quality of emissions measuring and reporting, among other things. If we do not measure and report, we do not know where we are. That is a challenge for the UK Government, particularly following the High Court’s ruling that their net zero strategy is unlawful.

The current Prime Minister removed the COP26 president, the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), from the Cabinet even before the UK’s COP presidency had ended. He stopped the Minister for Climate from attending Cabinet, and effectively banned the King from attending COP27. The UK Government have blocked plans to ease planning restrictions on onshore wind, despite its being the cheapest form of energy and key to the transition to a renewable energy future.

The UK Government must get the balance right and put the fight against climate change at the forefront of the Prime Minister’s policy agenda, as the First Minister of Scotland has done. We must all root for each other to succeed as we prepare for the worst effects of the climate catastrophe. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in answer to my questions and all the other questions that have been asked this afternoon.

3.30 pm

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Gray. I am sure that those in the know will be listening to the debate, and that your elevation to the peerage will happen very soon.

I am delighted to be here in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is attending the COP27 conference in Egypt at this moment, and to be able to respond to this timely debate secured by the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas)—who, I have to confess, is a friend of mine, even though we sit on opposite sides of the House. I am also pleased to welcome the Minister to her place; I think this debate is the first time that we have sat opposite each other in this Chamber, and I look forward to working with her in future in a friendly, debating way.

[*Ruth Jones*]

It will come as no surprise to anybody present, or indeed to anybody watching our proceedings, that our United Kingdom is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. That is why the case for tackling biodiversity loss, climate change, and the environmental risks to the health of the public is the challenge of our time—indeed, that is why the Climate and Ecology Bill is so important. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West is very proud to have been one of the original co-sponsors of that Bill when he was on the Back Benches, and I pay tribute to him for his work and commitment to these issues.

Halting and reversing biodiversity loss in the United Kingdom by 2030 is essential. We parliamentarians, particularly Ministers in His Majesty's Government, must do everything possible to make sure that that promise is realised. There can be no more dithering, no more delays and no more missed deadlines: this is an emergency, and it needs to be treated as such. I am afraid that the Government are setting their baseline too low. The 30 by 30 agenda ignores the other 70% of our land. Our national parks are in a poor state of health after 12 years of Conservative Government, and our protected natural areas need far more focus and support. The fact that this Tory Government failed to meet their own deadlines under the Environment Act 2021 does not inspire much confidence that they will ever get around to meeting the 30 by 30 deadline.

The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) mentioned the Office for Environmental Protection's location. I respectfully suggest that the shadow DEFRA team did not decry Worcester as its final resting place; rather, we were surprised. We were originally told that it was going to be Bristol, but that was a U-turn by the Government—we were not surprised by that.

Nature fundamentally underpins human health, our wellbeing and our collective prosperity. By protecting our planet and preserving our environment, we deliver for all our people in Newport West, in St Ives, and across the United Kingdom. Opposition Members, particularly my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), have always understood the importance of that challenge. We view the environment through a twin lens—human health and environmental health—and we see the impact of inaction all around us, such as last weekend's heavy rainfall and the subsequent flooding in places such as Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Hornsey and Wood Green, Chichester, Canterbury and Lewes. My hon. Friends the Members for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) have been out there speaking to businesses, engaging with local councils and supporting local people, and I thank them for that.

We have seen wildfires in Australia, Africa and the United States, and—as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said—we have seen drought in Zimbabwe, Sudan and other parts of southern Africa. This issue is as global as it is local, which is why we need to consider people living in increasingly expensive housing without proper insulation who are now increasingly dependent on prohibitively expensive fossil fuel energy. That is why a Labour Government will cut energy bills and fight climate change by insulating millions of homes and

making the UK the first major economy to have a zero-emission power system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) outlined. Moreover, when we form the next Government, we will introduce a proper windfall tax on the obscene profits of the oil and gas companies to protect both vulnerable people and our vulnerable planet.

I want to say a word about those living in communities plagued by toxic air and dirty water. Restoring nature will never happen successfully without us acknowledging that these issues disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities and the health of our natural environment. Our poorest communities are also twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood without nature-rich spaces, which is outrageous. I want our country to be a place where everyone has proper access to wild places and wildlife. In other words, delivering for the natural world requires both social and economic justice. A healthy natural world and more equitable access to nature are key priorities for us—but not just for Labour Members. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) outlined, there is growing cross-party consensus on the need to move now and to move fast, because we understand the importance of the UK doing its fair share to cut emissions in order to stay below 1.5°C of global warming.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has been clear on this and, as a party, we have pledged not just words but a promised investment of £28 billion every year until 2030 to tackle the climate crisis and create clean, green, secure jobs for people in all parts of our United Kingdom. A Labour Government will deliver a science-led, joined-up plan to tackle the climate and ecological emergency. We have committed to a robust net zero and nature test for every policy, as well as our £28 billion a year investment pledge. We want to create certainty for business and provide leadership on the world stage. That is how we seize the opportunities for the United Kingdom, while protecting nature here and abroad.

We know that climate action must be nature-positive action and that we must halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity by 2030 for the benefit of all people and the planet. This important declaration and the Climate and Ecology Bill alongside it will be a huge step towards achieving those aims. I am delighted to have been able to participate in this important debate today.

3.36 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):**

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, for what I believe is the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) very much for his timely securing of this important debate. Given that it is taking place at the time of COP27, I am mightily impressed with the timing. He is an outstanding champion for his constituency, particularly on the issue of nature and biodiversity. It has been a real joy to listen to the cross-party support for nature and biodiversity, and I will set out to respond to the many questions. They strayed across many different Departments, and I certainly work across Departments, because that is absolutely what we need to do in this area.

We do have a strong track record. It is not correct to say that we are the most nature-depleted country in the world. Depending on the measure, we are 142nd out



of 201. But we recognise that nature has been declining for a very long time. There are historical reasons for that, such as the pressure on land and the industrial revolution. That is why it is the mission of this Government to halt that trend by 2030, and then reverse it. Our world-leading target to halt the decline in species by 2030 demonstrates our very strong commitment. On nature, we have already implemented myriad measures to support biodiversity and to increase carbon capture through natural methods.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I noted the Minister's remarks about how she likes to work across Departments. I am particularly concerned about the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, part 5 of which will essentially remove environmental impact assessments and strategic environmental assessments and bring in environmental outcomes reports. It kind of gives the Secretary of State a blank cheque to do what he or she wishes to do, and I am very concerned about what it will mean for the planning system and therefore for the protection of nature. Could the Minister tell us what discussions have taken place between her Department and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about that Bill? I think that it poses potentially a very serious threat to the quality and sustainability of our natural world.

**Trudy Harrison:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right, but she should be reassured when I say that there must be no regression, and there will be no regression. I have been to speak with my counterparts in BEIS recently, and we are working with DLUHC as well, to ensure that the protections for our environment focus not on the EU as a whole but on the UK.

It might be helpful to set out our record. Although we recognise that there is much more to do, since 2010 we have supported the creation or management of 175,000 hectares of priority habitat. In 2021 alone, we created over 2,700 km of new hedgerows through the countryside stewardship scheme. That is over 3,870 different agreements. There were 9,000 countryside stewardship agreements with the management of hedgerows option, leading to over 46,000 km of hedgerows. Our farming and protected landscapes programme also planted 88 km of hedgerows and delivered around 45,000 hectares of habitat improvement for biodiversity.

We have established over 100 marine protected areas, and we are now putting in place byelaws to reinforce their protection, alongside our work to launch highly protected marine areas. We have brought over 5,800 hectares of peatland in England under restoration, predominantly through the £750 million nature for climate fund. We have also announced 22 ambitious projects receiving funding through the landscape recovery scheme, allowing land managers—in particular, farmers—to take a more long-term and large-scale approach to producing environmental and climate outcomes on their land.

Between 2010 and 2021, 123 hectares of new woodland have been planted across the UK. That is an area equivalent to Bedfordshire. Tree planting is so important for biodiversity, and it is at the heart of our environmental plans for the future. We increased tree planting and woodland creation by approximately 10% to 2,700 hectares of trees planted in England in 2021-22. Is it enough? Absolutely not, but we are improving every year. As part

of flood and coastal capital programmes, 25 schemes that include natural flood management measures have secured approval.

We are seeing that improvement in habitat also play out in the improvement in species such as the cirl bunting, which demonstrates how agri-environment schemes have supported species recovery. In 2016, the population exceeded 1,000 pairs, representing a nine-fold increase since conservation action commenced in the early 1990s. The marsh fritillary butterfly increased in abundance by 700% between 2005 and 2016, following years of decline, through action under the two moors threatened butterfly project. Our bat species increased by 47% between 1999 and 2019. Those are just some examples of the progress that is being made. It is important to have hope and to take personal responsibility for the way that we can all improve nature and biodiversity in our back gardens, our farms and right across this country.

Reaching net zero remains a top Government priority. We are really proud to lead the world in ending our own contribution to climate change, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because we are determined to seize the unprecedented economic opportunity it brings for jobs, innovation and exports. That is why our British energy security strategy and net zero strategy build on our 10-point plan and our blueprint for a green industrial revolution. Those commitments will unlock £100 billion of private investment and support 480,000 well-paid jobs in green industries by 2030. I know that many of those jobs will be in Cornwall, which I look forward to visiting. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives set out exactly what is needed right across the country and the need for society to play its part.

As part of our plans for decarbonisation—this is personal to me, because I was the Minister in the Department for Transport who led on it—we have published our ambitious transport decarbonisation plan. There has been much talk of COP27, but I was proud to stand on the world stage during transport day on 10 November last year at COP26—[*Interruption.*] Indeed, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) was there as well—where I set out what we were doing across the modes of transport to set our pathway to net zero by 2050. We will require all new builds from 2025 to be future-proofed with low carbon heating and world-leading levels of energy efficiency.

DEFRA has a vital role to play in delivering the Government's net zero strategy. During the debate, there have been many calls for us to work across Departments. That is absolutely what we do and I will give a few examples. The joint air quality unit works across DEFRA and DFT to improve air quality and reduce nitrogen oxide emissions. The Office for Zero Emission Vehicles works across DFT and BEIS to ensure that we roll out the electric vehicle programme. It is not true to say that the amount of money being spent on electric vehicles has been reduced; the focus has changed to ensure support for taxis and trucks, because we needed to diversify and ensure that our funding has the greatest impact.

We have boosted the nature for climate fund to total spend of more than £750 million by 2025 to protect, restore and expand the support and resilience of habitats such as peat bogs—both upland and lowland peat bogs are essential for nature. This will help us to achieve our ambitious targets to restore 35,000 hectares of peatlands

[Trudy Harrison]

by 2025 and treble woodland creation in England by the end of this Parliament. Yesterday I had the privilege of joining the Northumberland National Park Authority, and the day before I was in woodlands in Cumbria with the Forestry Commission, to understand how we can bust the barriers and increase planting of trees, both coniferous and deciduous, because we recognise the vital role that trees play as well as the value of supporting the UK timber industry. It was also a pleasure to visit A.W. Jenkinson to learn how it takes the waste from woodlands to create peat-free compost. There are fantastic opportunities like this one for our economy as we decarbonise and support biodiversity.

At COP26 last year, we brought nature into the centre of the climate COP for the first time. Today, at COP27 in Egypt, we will maintain our global leadership by demonstrating progress and integrated action on climate and nature since the UK's presidency, focusing on protecting forests, the ocean and nature. We will build political momentum to secure ambitious outcomes at the convention on biological diversity COP15 in Montreal next month. We are working to ensure that nature is resilient and adaptable to climate change. We recognise that the interlinked threats of climate change, pollution, and habitat and biodiversity loss threaten the security of global health, the food supply and the economy. In 2019, the value of natural capital in the UK was estimated to be £1.2 trillion. The biodiversity net gain measure created by the Environment Act 2021 to aid nature recovery will drive green growth by creating and supporting a private market estimated to be worth £135 million per year. We are committed to halting and reversing the decline of biodiversity, as I have set out. We will continue to implement our world-leading Environment Act, including by building on the 2030 species target by setting other long-term targets to improve our biodiversity, resource efficiency and air and water quality, and to reduce waste.

To set out what we are doing to create habitats and protect species, we have requirements on new developments to build habitats as well as legally binding targets to halt species decline by 2030. We are reducing plastic waste through bans on a number of single-use plastic items, as well as powers to introduce charges for single-use items of any material. We are recycling more plastic through the introduction of a deposit return scheme for single-use drink containers, and extended producer responsibility which makes producers responsible for the cost of the disposal of packaging waste.

**Ruth Jones:** I note that Minister said that the Government are introducing the deposit return scheme. I am pleased to hear that, but there have been four consultations and we have had no action yet. When will it happen?

**Trudy Harrison:** I am unable to provide the hon. Member with a confirmation of actual dates, but she should be assured that we are working across Government to ensure that we involve manufacturers and get this right.

**Wera Hobhouse:** There is increasing concern that we will introduce a deposit return scheme that is not fit for the 21st century—that is, one that involves going back to vending machines in supermarkets. There is a very strong push for the digital delivery of a deposit return scheme. Will the Government look into that?

**Trudy Harrison:** The hon. Lady will have to forgive me, because this is not my area in DEFRA, but I am happy to provide a more detailed response from the DEFRA Minister responsible for this matter. She will be aware of the various discussions that are going on—for example, on whether to include glass or not. I know that Scotland includes glass. Those are the kinds of discussions that we are having in DEFRA with our partners and stakeholders. We are ensuring that we get the scheme right and that we implement it as soon as possible.

We are also taking forward measures to tackle deforestation overseas and increase domestic planting. We are preventing UK businesses from using commodities associated with deforestation, committing the UK to planting 30,000 hectares of trees per year by the end of this Parliament, and maintaining new planting at that rate from 2025 onwards. There was reference to environmental targets. I hope that Members will appreciate that we have had 180,000 responses to the consultation. We are working at pace to review those views, and we look forward to updating Members on targets and our environmental plan very soon.

We are protecting our waters and cracking down on water companies that discharge sewage by enshrining in law a duty to reduce the impact of discharges from storm overflows. We are also cleaning up our air, through a requirement on local authorities to tackle air quality and making enforcement in smoke-controlled areas easier. We have established the independent Office for Environmental Protection, and I recently met the chief executive and chair of the organisation. We are also developing a third national adaptation programme, which addresses all 61 risks and opportunities identified in the latest climate change risk assessment.

I have set out quite clearly much of what has already been achieved, but also what we hope to achieve with our ambitious, world-beating, world-leading Environment Act, and with the support of brilliant Members across this House, not least my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives. He will wrap up the debate in the final minutes.

3.53 pm

**Derek Thomas:** I thank the Minister for her response, and I am glad she mentioned species. For example, the Cornish chough and the Manx shearwater are birds precious to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. They have made a remarkable recovery, and it is good to mention that along with all the other achievements.

In 2019, I was one of many Conservative MPs who supported the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), in setting out legislation on the commitment to net zero in the UK. I am very proud to have been a part of that discussion and debate. I have heard the various political points made by Opposition Members, but outside this place we see businesses big and small, schools, the public sector, farmers, food producers and householders all looking seriously at how they can decarbonise and promote nature recovery. That is because there has been a national effort, led by a consecutive Conservative Prime Ministers, to get everyone engaged in the process. I do not pretend that we have done enough; we should do more, more quickly, and the nature and climate declaration helps us to do that. I again thank the team for making it possible and launching it last week.

My colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), would have loved to be here to say more about the great things that are happening in Cornwall, but she has been detained in the Chamber. It is good to conclude by thanking everyone who took part. Let us move forward, recognising the great things that are in place, the targets and achievements, while recognising that by working together we can achieve much more, not just for our constituents but for people around the world.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Government support for a nature and climate declaration.

3.55 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## European Women's Football Championship: Girls and Young Women

4.30 pm

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 2022 UEFA European Women's Football Championship and participation of girls and young women in sport.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Before we kick off, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has shown great leadership in this place, not just on women's football but women's sport in general. I really hoped she could be with us today, but sadly she cannot.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate, which has been a little late due to the sad death of the Queen. It was scheduled for just after the summer recess following the Lionesses' success but had to be pushed back. I want to take this opportunity to record my and the House's congratulations to our fantastic English national football team, the Lionesses, on their historic win at the European championships earlier this year.

After 56 years of hurt, England finally brought football back home, and it took the women to achieve it. The nation celebrated and we were all bursting with pride. It was the first time in my life I have ever seen England lift an international trophy in football, and I was bawling my eyes out as it happened. The residents of Teddington in my constituency were so proud that the Lensbury club was the Lionesses' training base for the tournament—and still is for some of their home fixtures—that crowds gathered that night at about midnight or 1 am to welcome the Lionesses back from Wembley to celebrate their awesome victory.

There is no doubt that the Lionesses brought the nation together this summer, and the legacy of their stunning win is there to be shaped. News this week from YouGov that an extra 4 million of us now define ourselves as fans of women's sport is testament to their performance. Indeed, women's participation and profile in other sports is increasing. But like many of the Lionesses themselves, I strongly believe that that legacy should be more than just warm memories. It must mean support for the generation of girls and young women now inspired to get out on the pitch and bend it like Beth.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Only 63% of young girls have football offered as part of physical education in school, and football continues to largely be seen as a sport for men and boys. Does the hon. Lady agree that this cultural change should start at a young age to drive passion for the sport among girls and young women, and nurture future talent?

**Munira Wilson:** I could not agree more. The hon. Lady has already cited a statistic I was going to come to later on. I could talk in a lot of detail about how we must promote girls' sport in schools and the community.

I saw at first hand the impact of England's triumph on my own daughter, who is eight. Together we attended her first live football match during the tournament, just down the road from where we live in Brentford. We went to see Spain play Denmark. By the final, when England were playing Germany, she was giving her own expert commentary on the game and providing live



[Munira Wilson]

demos of various tricks in our living room. She was super excited when we had the chance to watch the Lionesses beat the USA at Wembley last month.

Like parents and PE teachers across the country, I believe girls like my daughter deserve every chance and should be given every possible opportunity to follow that passion, be it for football or any other sport. This is a legacy that the Lionesses themselves have thrown their full energy into achieving. Following their success in the summer, they wrote to both the Conservative party leadership candidates, calling on them to take action to ensure every young girl in the nation is able to play football at school. They called for all girls to have access to two hours of PE lessons every week. The current Prime Minister responded at the time by saying he would love to see all schools provide two hours a week.

It sounds like a simple ask, but as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) has already mentioned, just 63% of schools in England offer equal access to football during PE lessons. That means that more than one in three girls are excluded from the beautiful game. When we look at secondary education in particular, the numbers get even worse, with less than half of schools empowering girls to play football as part of the curriculum. At secondary schools, teaching gets increasingly gendered, whereas in primary schools, children are taught in mixed groups.

According to the Youth Sport Trust, a staggering 42,000 hours of PE have been lost over the last decade as the curriculum has been more and more squeezed, with a relentless focus on tests and ensuring boxes are ticked for Ofsted inspections. Girls in particular have been impacted. The trust found that by the age of seven, girls were already a whole year behind on physical literacy—that is the development of movement and sports skills.

With such a patchy offering of girls' football in schools, it is no surprise that many of our current generation of women footballers have spoken of struggling to access the sport, relying on extracurricular clubs and far-flung opportunities to rise to the top of their game. That is not to talk down the importance of extracurricular clubs and activities. The Liberal Democrats would love to see a much stronger offer from the Government in that area, including vouchers to help all children access extracurricular opportunities—both as part of the post-pandemic catch-up package, and longer term, outside the covid recovery.

A number of organisations are doing a sterling job in supporting the women's game. Of course, that includes the Football Association. It runs grassroots initiatives in schools, such as the Disney-inspired Shooting Stars programme, and in the community, such as the Squad Girls' Football programme, which is designed to keep secondary school-aged girls engaged with football where PE lessons may fall short. That is supported by Sport England. The FA's community-based Weetabix Wildcats programme for girls is offered through Hampton Rangers Junior Football Club in my constituency on a Saturday morning. I was also pleased to support the FA's #LetGirlsPlay initiative earlier this year, by going to play football with girls at both Twickenham School and Trafalgar Junior School in my constituency. I urge all Members to take up the opportunity next year. It was

great fun—even if people made total fools of themselves, as I am sure I did—but it was also a real boost to the schools and to the pupils there.

McDonald's Fun Football programme brought England legends Sir Geoff Hurst and Karen Carney into Parliament last week. I learnt that it runs waves of footballing activity across the country, with over 500 children in my constituency benefiting from the programme at Orleans Park School. They also enabled two year seven pupils from Teddington School to have the training session of a lifetime with footballing hero Beth Mead in September. There is no doubt that those extracurricular clubs and corporate responsibility initiatives play a vital role in nurturing children's passions, but it is equally important that they do not become a substitute for access to sport in school for free as part of the curriculum. Otherwise, we risk football—and indeed many other sports—becoming elitist and open to only those who can afford to play.

I am grateful to the parliamentary engagement team for all its work in securing feedback and stories from parents, young people and teachers for this debate. One teacher, James, said:

“My daughter is involved in netball and cricket outside of school. This has given her great fitness and confidence and is hugely beneficial to her overall wellbeing. For her to actively participate in this way costs hundreds of pounds per year but she simply would not have had any opportunity to play team sport regularly otherwise.”

We cannot let that cost be a barrier.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady will be aware that for many decades, many of Scotland and England's national players for the women's teams have had to do other day jobs, while their male counterparts have been paid frankly outrageous fortunes to play professionally. Does she agree that we need greater coverage in the media, and greater sponsorship and support for the women's game, so that our female players can enjoy some of the riches that the male players enjoy?

**Munira Wilson:** I could not agree more. As the hon. Lady says, there needs to be parity in terms of salaries, sponsorship and so on. That does not mean that the women's game wants to ape the men's game. I went to an event in this place celebrating women's football, and the clear message given by those who are involved in the women's sport was that women's football has its own special culture. Frankly, I think it is far healthier and far nicer than the men's sport. I would never have taken my young daughter to a men's football match, just because of the sort of culture and atmosphere there.

I do not think that male footballers need to be paid as much as they are paid, but I do think that women footballers should be paid more. If I am not mistaken, Lewes Football Club is the one football club in the country that pays men and women equally.

I welcome the Minister who will answer the debate today, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew); I welcome him to his place and to his new role. He is from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I very much welcome some of the positive noises that have come from both the Secretary of State and her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), on this issue.

I understand that the Department is committed to investing some £230 million to build or improve up to 8,000 sports pitches across the UK. That is clearly a step in the right direction. However, it is also yet another example of how utterly disjointed the Government's policies are when it comes to our children and young people, because at the same time that DCMS is building community pitches, schools across our country are haemorrhaging playing fields and other sports facilities due to shrinking budgets. Liberal Democrat analysis has uncovered that 100 school sports fields have been sold off in the last seven years, impacting more than 75,000 pupils. That not only puts the Lionesses' legacy at risk but potentially bars tens of thousands of children from a full range of outdoor sports.

While we are on the subject of sports fields, it is with great regret that I tell the House that Udney Park playing fields in Teddington, which is in my constituency, was sold off in 2015 by Imperial College to a hedge fund company that sought to make a quick buck on that precious community site. Having been prevented by planning inspectors from concreting over the fields and building on them, the facility has since gone to rack and ruin, with community groups fighting tooth and nail for it to be maintained for community sporting use.

I salute my constituent Jonathan Dunn, who has led the charge to bring Udney Park playing fields back into community use, and I hope that, now the ground has been sold on to another investor, that it will be revitalised quickly and then opened up to the many grassroots sports clubs in my constituency that are clamouring for playing field space across the Borough of Richmond and simply cannot get enough of it. If the Minister is able to offer any assistance in that regard, I would be absolutely delighted.

Participating in sport is a fantastic way to take care of young people's physical health, to boost their mental wellbeing and to teach children important skills, such as teamwork and communication. More than 150 children and young people sent in their views for this debate, as part of the Pupil Parliament programme, and they wrote overwhelmingly about the positive impact that sport has had on their lives. They said it made them more confident and more fulfilled, and gave them a sense of community.

At the same time, when those children were asked what had been holding them back, the same few words cropped up and again, including phrases such as "men's sport" and "women's sport", which is the idea that netball and gymnastics are female and football, rugby and cricket are male. In light of the Lionesses' victory, those ideas and phrases may seem like outdated tropes, but they are far from being a thing of the past when our children and young people still feel held back and over a third of girls do not have the opportunity to play football at school.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Women's football has a longer history than people might think. Church documents reportedly refer to women playing football in my local authority area in South Lanarkshire back in 1628. Does the hon. Member agree that women's contributions to football over the centuries should be recognised more frequently, to inspire girls and young women to take up the sport today?

**Munira Wilson:** Yes; indeed I could not agree more. We need to celebrate and give a profile to that history as part of the process of inspiring the next generation, in the same way that often happens with the men's game, to be honest.

I am very grateful that the public engagement team have facilitated pupils' interaction with this debate and of course I also thank all the students from the Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School, Eardisley CE Primary School and Knighton Church in Wales Primary School for participating in the process and feeding back to this debate. One parent, Diana, described the "misogyny" she had witnessed at her daughter's mixed-gender primary school football club. She said:

"I approached the school and asked if they could run a group for girls who were leaving the after-school club, one after another. The school offered her netball. It was at that point she lost all interest in sport."

So I will echo the very simple ask of one of the pupils who responded to my survey. She said:

"Let girls participate in all sports at school. I want to do the same sports as the boys—if we do dance, so should they. And if they get...rugby, so should we."

As MP for Twickenham, I am so proud of our strong sports heritage and the thriving network of grassroots sports clubs, run almost exclusively by dedicated volunteers. At the elite level, Twickenham is of course the home to English rugby, and we will play host to the Rugby World Cup. The gendered title of "Women's World Cup" was dropped last year, so the Rugby World Cup is coming to England in 2025. I hope that England's women's team will come to defend their world cup title. We all wish the Red Roses, England's women's team, who have reached the final this weekend against hosts New Zealand, the very best of luck.

In Twickenham, we also have the Harlequins, a premiership rugby club, whose home the Stoop is just across the road from the Rugby Football Union. They have a phenomenally successful women's team. Bushy Park was home to the very first parkrun, and we also lay claim to the oldest hockey club in the world, in Teddington, which has a number of girls' and women's teams.

I spoke earlier this week to an inspirational woman in my constituency, Natalie Raja, who founded Bushy Park girls' cricket club 10 years ago, when her daughters and other girls were struggling to find anywhere to play cricket. From the handful of girls she gathered together in 2012, she now has 120 girls and women from age 5 upwards, and a cabinet full of trophies. Sadly—this shocked me—as recently as last season, when she was negotiating access to pitches for her teams, she was still receiving emails saying, "We need to get the boys' fixtures sorted first, then we can organise the girls."

In football, as well as Hampton and Richmond football club, there are so many grassroots football clubs—I could not mention them all. Two I could mention with plentiful girls' teams are Whitton Wanderers—they are very close to where I live—and Hearts of Teddlothian. I give a special shout-out to the Parakeets and Cygnets, dedicated girls' clubs founded by a local dad, Eamonn, when he could not find anywhere for his girls to play football because they were regularly being put off by joining boys clubs.

[Munira Wilson]

Thamesians women's rugby team, who currently train at St Mary's while Udney Park is out of action, flooded my inbox with support for this debate to talk about the impact of sport on their lives. I was particularly moved by this comment:

"I'm 25 years old and I have been playing rugby since I was 19. I am 6ft 1 and 85 kg and for the first 19 years of my life, I hated the way I looked, felt and I had no confidence and no motivation. I found rugby as a way of making some new friends and enjoying a run around while doing so. To say it changed my life is an understatement. Women's sport is special, because it brings a group of people who face similar challenges in day-to-day life together, and provides a safe space, a place for encouragement and love, and lights a fire within people who didn't realise they had it. Being around women who are praised for having different body types has skyrocketed my confidence. I feel empowered in my life outside of sport, knowing the things that I have accomplished and my worth."

That is what the Lionesses want for girls and women across England: the chance to get involved in women's football and, indeed, other sports, and to allow it to change their lives. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I want the same: equal access to the joys and opportunities of playing sport for every child, no matter their gender, their background or where they happen to live.

In an interview on Sunday, Baroness Sue Campbell, the FA's director for women's football, spoke positively about the Lionesses' meeting with the current Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but said that the big issue is the Department for Education. I wholeheartedly support the steps DCMS has taken to support women and girls' access to sport in the community. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about what else he and his Department are doing to support girls and women's participation in sport at all levels, especially the grassroots. I hope he can also tell us how he plans to work constructively across Government, especially with the Department for Education.

In particular, does the Minister agree that the sport premium is so important when it comes to supporting access to sport and tackling childhood obesity? Will he press his Education colleagues to continue funding the sport premium in schools? Will he press the Department to include PE in the Ofsted inspection framework, as the FA and the Lionesses have called for? What of the Prime Minister's assertion that he would like to see two hours of PE for all? Will we see that come to fruition? Will the Minister impress on his colleagues the need for a moratorium on selling off school playing fields, which means funding schools properly so they do not have to do that?

I hope the Minister will agree—as we have heard from the quotes and stories I have cited—that sport is crucial for everyone's physical and mental wellbeing, yet women are too often left behind. In particular, sport helps to boost children's educational and academic outcomes. If we truly want to celebrate the Lionesses' amazing victory this summer, we need to secure their legacy by working together to help deliver for England's next generation of sportswomen.

4.50 pm

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I commend the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the debate and on her magnificent speech.

There is a delicious irony in the hon. Member for Twickenham talking about football, but to her complete credit she spoke about women's sport in the round, and she gave a good indication of what we need to be doing in sport now.

I love football—I make no apology for being a huge football fan. The offer in the UK is quite fantastic. We have the premier league—the world-leading brand—and we have many professional leagues across all four of our nations. We have millions of fans and people who are paid good money to play sport. Of course, that also brings revenue into the Treasury, so what is not to like? What a brilliant way to spend a Saturday or Sunday afternoon—watching football live or on the television. The offer is great.

Sadly, my own playing days are now behind me. As a rather rotund 50-something-year-old, I have stopped playing, but I have two sons who play to a very good standard, and me watching them at the weekend is important. As a huge non-league fan, I am regularly found at my local clubs in Aldershot, Bracknell, Woking and Sutton. As I mentioned, it is a great way to spend the weekend with decent, real people.

Following the success of the women's Euro 2022—what a success and what a magnificent achievement it was—I want to talk about women's football. The progress that has been made in women's sport over the last decade or so is remarkable. Women's football has become the fastest-growing sport in the UK, which is brilliant. The stats speak for themselves. Nearly 70,000 people were at Old Trafford to watch England's UEFA Euro 2022 opener against Austria. Recently, a friendly against the United States at Wembley attracted a record 78,000 fans, which is quite extraordinary. People are paying good money to watch fantastic football, and that is just a start. Funding for women's football still lags far behind what we see in the men's game, but the way to address that is to tackle grassroots football first and then to build up, which is what is happening at the moment.

What of the future? The latest FA survey has found that growth across the board—from match-day broadcast, commercial and prize money sources—is exponential. Clubs report year-on-year commercial revenue growth of 33% for women's football, which is amazing. Some 77% of female leagues now have a title sponsor, up from only 11% last year, which is extraordinary growth.

According to FIFA, 29 million women and girls play football worldwide—in comparison, the men's game probably has at least 10 times that number—and the aim is to facilitate 60 million female participants by 2026. I think we will smash that comfortably, but there is a danger here: 64% of girls quit playing sport by the time they are 16. We have work to do not just in building the girls' game but in ensuring that girls who play football, or any sport, stay with it and keep playing into their adult lives.

I am proud to be the MP for Bracknell, in east Berkshire, and the local offer there for all sports is really amazing. We have grassroots money and a council—Bracknell Forest Council—that supports male and female football. Why wouldn't it? Football improves teamwork, camaraderie, decision making, discipline and mental and physical wellbeing.

In my view, the benefits of sport for everyone are beyond doubt. We need to encourage girls to stay in sport for the reasons I have discussed—for teamwork



and mental health—and to bring young girls together. That is perhaps something young boys find a bit easier, because the structure of the game is that boys play football and girls might not. But why can boys and girls not play football equally, in the same numbers and with the same opportunities available to them?

**Hannah Bardell:** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that men and boys are our allies in this challenge of equality? Men like him and the Minister, who speak up for women's sport, are crucial in that. Does he also agree that the FA has historically imposed some challenging rules on boys and girls, and young men and women, playing together for fun? Breaking down some of those barriers and having people playing together across the gender spectrum is really important.

**James Sunderland:** The hon. Lady makes an interesting couple of points. Women, of course, do not need men in order to play football, but it is incumbent on men to encourage the female game and to get people playing, and on dads like me, who do not have daughters, to get girls playing as well.

The hon. Lady mentioned grassroots football. It is so important that we nip the stigma attached to female football in the bud. It is complete nonsense. Female football is really exciting to watch on TV. The Euros were really exciting. Like the hon. Member for Twickenham, I watched them and I was overcome—it was just the most brilliant occasion. I have watched and played men's football all my life, but women's football is the growth sport now. It is where it is at; it is where things are going, and we have to embrace and support it.

In Bracknell, PlaySport delivers a weekly girls-only football programme for girls aged five to 11. It does that in partnership with our local football club, Bracknell Town football club, which comprises men's, youths', ladies' and junior female teams. Who could forget that wonderful evening on Monday, when Bracknell Town hosted Ipswich in the first round of the FA cup? It was a brilliant night. We almost got there. It was 0-0 in the 65th minute—perhaps there would be a replay at Portman Road—but Ipswich came through to win 3-0. However, the important point was that there were women in the crowd; there were girls who I know play football in Bracknell supporting their local team. It was just brilliant. What's not to like?

In July 2022, 25 players, including eight at international level, took part in a women's walking football competition at Bracknell leisure centre. Interestingly, plans are being developed for the leisure centre to be rebuilt in 2028 with a football stadium and a new sports centre that will embrace both the female and the male game. How fantastic would it be to have Bracknell men's and women's teams in the football league? There is a lot to look forward to.

Women's football is on an unprecedented rise. It is the growth sport in the UK—let us get behind it. Funding has increased tenfold for the female game over the past decade, but we need to spend more on it. Grassroots football turns into adult football, which turns into professional football, so it is worth investing in it. The national team's success right now is a fantastic opportunity to embrace the game more widely, so let us build on and reinforce that success. I am very proud that Bracknell itself is poised to take on the grassroots women's game.

The first thing we need to do is make sure that local clubs and schools across the UK embrace girls' sport, particularly football. Opportunities for men and women, boys and girls, have to be completely equal across the board. We need more adult volunteers, and we need more parents to embrace the girls' game—why wouldn't they? It is a great way to spend a weekend. We need enhanced Government and FA funding to support the girls' and the women's game. I find myself—quite strangely—congratulating the BBC: what it is doing now on TV across the UK to promote the female game is brilliant, and I commend it on that. It is great that we can now switch on the TV and watch either men's or women's football.

My final point is that equality in sport is really important. We have heard some horror stories about where there has not been equality and where there has still been a stigma about the female game. It should not be there. The female game should be as natural as the men's game. Let's get stuck in, Minister.

4.59 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I wholeheartedly thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this debate. I am sorry that it was somewhat delayed, but it is fabulous to have the opportunity to wholeheartedly congratulate the Lionesses on a truly remarkable result at the Euros. I hope that she and they know that all football fans in Scotland really were behind them. I am delighted to see what they have done for not just their generation of footballers but the next generation. That goes beyond just England; it goes across all these islands. We hope that the investment that has come into clubs will be emulated and replicated in Scotland. We have many fantastic players in Scotland who play in the English leagues, as the hon. Lady and other Members know.

Members may be interested to know that football was invented in Scotland. It belongs to no specific group; it belongs to us all. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) highlighted, it goes back a long way—potentially to the 1600s, although I have the historical facts only back to the 1800s, when women played in corsets, hats and heeled boots. Thankfully, our attire on the football pitch has come some way since that time.

As the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said, it is crucial that we talk about inclusion and equality. When we talk about participation and inclusion for minority groups—particularly black and minority ethnic groups, who have been historically excluded and have faced barriers, as Sport England identified in a 2020 report, and members of the LGBTQ community and queer women—we have to look at the challenges they face and ensure that we include everyone. I declare an interest as a big lesbian and someone who has been kicking a ball around for as long as I can remember. I see the current debate around the rights and inclusion of trans women and non-binary folk as particularly distressing. We must stand firm with them and their right to be included in all aspects of society, including sport and, of course, the beautiful game of football.

Modern football was invented in Scotland, and women have long fought for their place, despite significant discrimination. As the hon. Member for Twickenham rightly said, contemporary women's football is an

[Hannah Bardell]

opportunity to do things differently. There are prejudices and bigotry in the men's game that we need to kick out, and the women's game is an opportunity to set a different standard.

I grew up playing football in Livingston. I probably peaked at about 11, but I saw boys I played alongside going on into real, structured environments. If it was not for the fact that my primary 7 teacher, Mrs Shaw, who deserves an honourable mention, gave an equal opportunity to the boys and the girls in our school, I might not have continued on to play for the University of Stirling team, which included some former members of the Scotland international team, so we were in good company. That was the first structured setting that I experienced—if going for a pint after training and then doing a hill race can be considered structure.

I care passionately about equality and diversity in football and all sport. I grew up playing in teams, and I have recently joined a team called the Camp Hellcats in Glasgow. I also have the honour of playing in the women's parliamentary team here at Westminster, which the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) founded with me and other Members from across the House. We have a regular kickabout, and we play games. There are members of that team here today.

I want to talk a little about the Hellcats, because there could not be a better example of what participation is and what it means than that incredible group of straight, LGBTQ+ and non-binary women. I asked Amanda, the person who got me involved in the team, what it meant to her and what the history was. She said:

"We formed in the pandemic and we just had enough of not being able to do anything together. Some of us used to play with other 5s but they were mixed and a lot of the time the guys just hogged the ball and showed off which was frustrating."

Is that not a familiar tale?

In the part of the pandemic when organised sport was allowed, Camp Hellcats went off to Goals, on the south side of Glasgow—just a bunch of pals plonked into a WhatsApp group. Amanda said:

"The funniest memory I have of those early games is that we had to keep 2 metres away from each other, and there were staff in high Viz vests...patrolling the pitches to make sure nobody was getting too close...From that first game, friends of friends were added to the chat and it has just grown and grown since then into 2 games on a Monday, training on a Wednesday, competitions on weekends".

Camp Hellcats now has support from Goal Click and EE, which just goes to show what it has achieved in the short time since it was founded. Amanda said that it has given her an opportunity to fall back in love with sport. She played national level hockey as a teenager and then stopped because there was nowhere to go with it. To be in her 30s now, finding so much joy in running around for an hour on a Monday night with her pals, is a great feeling. She said:

"It's a very positive environment to be in and it's totally changed my lifestyle as a result. I've never been healthier, physically or mentally too—and especially in lockdown that was huge! And to watch the group grow"

and see the passion is "incredible". She continued:

"There's also something great about taking up 2 pitches...every week and walking off after to a car park of dudes waiting to go on. Taking up that space feels important."

I do not think that there could be a greater example of what it really means.

Megan, the captain of the team, spoke to me of her own experience. I have to say that my experience of her is the incredible ability that she has for encouragement, motivation and tactical strategy on the pitch. She said:

"I played for a boys team, got bullied out of it and lost all confidence. I didn't kick a ball again until Camp Hellcats. It's my personal mission that no player will ever be made to feel that way...I'm not sure how to put it, but ultimately we came together as a group of people who never had a place in football growing up, for the most part. Being captain of this team has enabled me to gain so much confidence and nothing makes me happier than seeing the team succeed. With everything I do for myself and the team, I remind myself how proud teenage me would feel."

There is not a better way to reflect what the debate is about, and what football is about. For a lot of folk growing up like myself in the '80s, '90s and even the 2000s, sport was a sanctuary when society was rife with homophobia. To play among women and to see so much great inclusiveness across the women's game is truly remarkable, because we have led the way on inclusion, and it is great to see the men finally catching up.

I pay tribute to Aussie football player Josh Cavallo and the Scottish footballer Zander Murray, who have both come out recently and who will no doubt pave the way for others, but that makes the hosting of the World cup by Qatar this year all the more offensive and, I have to say, disgusting. Qatar treats LGBTQ people as illegal and as criminals, and it is simply not safe for us to go there. It is high time that we, as a family of nations, and Government Members stand up and refuse to support such nations in hosting international sporting events. If we allow them to do that, and they want to invite the world, the world should be welcome to go, but the truth is that it is not.

LGBTQ women in top-level football are many in number. Many young women will look up to players such as Scotland's Rachel Corsie, the US's Megan Rapinoe and England's Demi Stokes. I pay tribute, as I did at the beginning, to England's women—the great Lionesses—after what they achieved at the Euros this year. It is fair to say that decades of listening to the England men's team telling folk that they were going to "bring football home" had become a bit tedious, so it was quite a treat to see the England women do what the men had serially failed to do for many decades.

The success of the Lionesses, and the resource and money that have been put into the women's game by folk such as Sue Campbell and Dawn Airey, who have championed the women's game from grassroots to club level up and to national team level, including media coverage, are incredibly important. Of course, Scotland's women and girls benefit from that. We certainly hope that the Scottish Football Association and the Scottish Professional Football League will be watching carefully and looking to emulate that success and to work with those in England and across the world.

Our clubs in Scotland are developing, and it is great to see the men's clubs bring on women's teams, but we all know in Scotland of the success of Glasgow City, which was championed by Laura Montgomery. Many Scotland players have come through that team, which was never attached to a men's team. It can be done, and that team is proof that it can be done. People may be interested to know that we have come a long way since the first recorded international women's football match, which was played in Edinburgh on 9 May 1881 in Easter Road

stadium. A team representing Scotland allegedly beat a team representing England 3-0, according to the history books.

There is so much more that I could say, but the fundamental point is that this debate is incredibly important. Cross-parliamentary support for women's and girls' football must be at the forefront of our minds following the success of England, to ensure that all the home nations can emulate that success and that we can all stand on the global stage and be proud of our women and girls in sport and football.

5.9 pm

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I have the immense pleasure of responding to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this debate, and on her excellent contribution. It is a shame that this debate was postponed, because I am sure that many more hon. Members would have loved to have contributed to pay their respect and tributes to the England women's football team.

Like other Members, I love football and sport; Parliament is at its best when we all come together to celebrate the success of our national teams. I am making a bit of a habit of coming to Westminster Hall and agreeing with Members from all sides during a debate. This year, we all cheered as the fantastic Lionesses captivated the nation and won the 2022 UEFA European women's football championship. The women's Euros win was England's first major women's tournament victory ever, and the country's first major competition win since 1966. Although, like the Minister, I am a proud Welsh MP, and it may usually be a sticking point to cheer on an England side, I am happy to put our historic sporting rivalry aside for this special occasion.

I take the opportunity to put on the record my well wishes for Rob Page and the Wales men's World cup squad. The line-up is being announced tonight in my neighbouring constituency, Rhondda. All of us back home are excited to sing "Yma o Hyd" over the next few weeks. But today's focus, quite rightly, is on the important progress to be made to ensure that women's sport more widely receives equal parity with men's participation.

The Euros final was watched by more than 17 million people, and the Lionesses have truly become an inspiration to many girls and young women across the UK. Labour believes that must represent a turning point in women's football and sport. A record-breaking 87,000 people attended the final, with nearly 575,000 in attendance across the entire championships, and 84% of those who attended said the tournament improved their perception of women's football. As a result, 416,000 new opportunities were created in England across schools, clubs and communities to engage women and girls in grassroots football. That is all to be celebrated, but we need to build a lasting legacy, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Twickenham.

Major sporting event success can be a powerful driver of grassroots sporting participation. Unfortunately, this Government have a poor record of building on our sports stars' success. A decade on from the 2012 Olympics, we have seen facilities forgotten and physical activity has flatlined. The Government have failed to address

the wider societal inequalities that make certain groups less likely to get active, and well-meaning initiatives, such as This Girl Can, have not met their participation targets, with insufficient strategic Government focus.

As the National Audit Office confirmed this year:

"Grassroots participation in sport did not receive the post-London Olympics and Paralympics boost hoped for at the time."

The Government must learn from their previous failures and capitalise on the momentum that the Lionesses have created to ensure that more girls and young women are inspired to play sport. We need to address sporting disparities. It is widely reported, as we have heard from other Members, that women are less active than men. The physical activity gender gap starts very young, with girls being less active than boys from the age of five. Girls and women are also less likely to enjoy sports and physical activity. Beyond providing opportunity, then, we need to do better at boosting confidence and making sport safe, inclusive and enjoyable.

As we have heard, unequal access to sports in schools is holding us back. Currently, instead of being taught to play football, girls are instead taught comparable sports, such as netball or hockey. According to Sport England, only 63% of all schools currently offer equal access to girls' football in PE lessons. In 2022, that is outdated and outrageous. We call on the Government to seize the opportunity created by the women's Euros and introduce an equal access guarantee into the curriculum to create equal access to sports for all girls. That would ensure that girls are given the opportunity to try football at school. Will the Minister adopt that policy?

We know that despite growing prominence in recent years, rights, conditions and pay for women footballers are not yet anywhere near where they need to be. That is why the Labour party strongly supports the fan-led review's recommendation of a dedicated review of the women's game, and we welcome that finally being put into motion. The review and the process must remain fully independent and challenge the existing structures where needed. We need to ensure that the women's game flourishes sustainably, that footballers are rewarded fairly, and that girls are supported to get into the sport.

Will the Minister please update us on what progress has been made so far and set out a timeline for when he expects the review to report? Given the Government's flip-flopping and delay on their commitment to implementing the central recommendation of the fan-led review of the men's game—the recommendation that there be an independent regulator—how can we have any confidence that they will act on the recommendations of the review of the women's game? What assurances can the Minister give us on that?

We cannot ignore the fact that the cost of living crisis and the impact of soaring energy bills on sports and leisure facilities presents a major challenge. How does the Minister plan to increase women's and girls' participation in sport when closures, reduced timetables and price increases are probable, particularly from April 2023, when there is no guarantee of financial support for the sector?

We need the Government to acknowledge the power of sport to build healthier, happier, more connected communities, to save the NHS money, and to reduce pressure on public services. Labour will continue to cheer on our inspiring female athletes from all sports—they



[Alex Davies-Jones]

are the best of Britain—while fighting to secure a long-term legacy from our sporting achievements for future generations of girls and women.

5.15 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important debate. Let me say at the outset that I have made this issue a huge priority for me in this role. I am passionate about making sure that all sports are inclusive. I echo some of her points about the forthcoming World cup and share many of her concerns. This morning I met the Qatari ambassador. I sought assurances that the “Everyone is welcome” message is meant, and that fans will find that when they get to Qatar. I also raised the frankly unacceptable comments that Khalid Salman made yesterday; I made my views very clear indeed.

**Hannah Bardell:** I put on the record my thanks to the Minister for doing that, and for raising his concerns, which many of us share, about the treatment of LGBT fans at the World cup. I appreciate that this Government did not have anything to do with the corruption that led to Qatar being chosen to hold the World cup, but I hope that all parliamentarians will consider how we will lobby such Governments and make sure that they do not get to hold international sporting competitions, and hold a place on the world stage, when they treat people from LGBT communities in such a way.

**Stuart Andrew:** I think that the hon. Lady will know that this issue will continue to be high on my agenda. The Government are fully committed to supporting women's sport at every opportunity, and to pushing for greater participation, employment and commercial opportunities in women's sport, and for greater visibility both in the media and, as was mentioned, in this House. Let me start by wishing the Red Roses the very best of luck for the rugby union world cup final this weekend.

I am delighted to take on the role of Minister for sport at such an exciting time, and I look forward to making real progress on issues that I feel very passionately about, such as equality and diversity. Overall, I can see that there has been clear progress in a number of areas, but it is also clear that we have a long way to go. I am determined to strive for greater equality and opportunity for girls and women.

I join the hon. Member for Twickenham in celebrating the wonderful success that we witnessed in women's sport this summer, when our very own Lionesses beat the German team at Wembley to lift the UEFA European championship trophy, teaching the men a thing or two. That inspirational tournament was staged in July in venues across England, from Rotherham and Wigan down to Southampton and Brighton.

So many records were broken during the tournament, but I will just mention two outstanding examples. The final at Wembley was attended by a crowd of over 87,000 people. That was a record for a women's international game in Europe, and it broke new ground for a women's or men's Euro final tournament game. The tournament

also became the most watched women's Euros ever, with a global cumulative live viewership of 365 million across TV, out-of-home viewing and streaming. That massive number is more than double the number of people who watched the last UEFA women's championship, staged in the Netherlands in 2017.

My local pub, the Red Lion, was transformed; usually, everyone is watching Leeds United, but they watched the championship, and I cannot tell you how excited they were and how they cheered. It was fantastic to witness. The tournament was a truly groundbreaking moment for sport. It has super-charged interest in the women's game, bringing it to the forefront of people's mind. We are looking forward to that momentum being maintained and built on, with the FIFA women's World cup in Australia and New Zealand next year.

When I went to Wembley to see the Lionesses beat the USA, I sat next to Baroness Sue Campbell, and my arm was bruised afterwards because she was clutching on to it with so much excitement. When I meet her in December, I will know to sit on the opposite side of the table. She is clearly a passionate advocate of the sport.

To commemorate the team's incredible achievement, we are working with the Football Foundation and the FA to name sites after the players in the towns and cities that shaped their careers. That is in addition to investing £230 million between 2021 and 2025 to improve grassroots sports facilities across the UK and help more women and girls to access high-quality facilities. I am looking forward to going to Stenhousemuir multisport facility tomorrow to see the work going on there and to support the Billie Jean King women's tennis tournament in Glasgow.

We know this is not a one-off. Major sporting events unite the nation, instil pride in our communities and give us all something to feel good about, in a way that few other things can achieve. They also provide fantastic opportunities to create lasting legacies. We continue to see the impact of the women's Euros. It has increased interest in the club side of the women's game. Clubs in the women's super league, which kicked off in September, are still reporting huge surges in demand for tickets. The new broadcast deal with Sky will see women's football reach more people than ever.

The women's super league attendance record has been smashed, as we have already heard, after 48,000 watched the north London derby between Arsenal and Twickenham—sorry, Tottenham, I am getting Twickenham on the brain—on Saturday 24 September. That would have been frankly unimaginable just a few years ago. We saw something similar in Birmingham for the Commonwealth games in the summer. There were some important firsts, including more medal events for women than men—a first in major multisport event history—and 173,000 spectators attended the T20 women's cricket at Edgbaston, a record for women's cricket.

This year's rugby league world cup, played across venues mainly in the north of England, has been the first time that all three world cups—men's, women's and wheelchair—have been staged at the same time. That has helped to give visibility and a platform to those teams and players. Women and wheelchair players are also receiving prize money for the first time, as well as equal participation fees across all three tournaments. I wish all the teams every success.

As a country, we continue to reap the benefits of hosting major and mega sporting events. That is why the Government are fully committed to building on our world-leading reputation as a host. Although it is right to celebrate and reflect on the success of the Euros, we must now refocus to ensure that that success translates to the continued growth of the women's game. That is why I am pleased that in September we launched an independent review of the future of women's football, which is being chaired by former England and Great Britain footballer Karen Carney.

The review is looking at how to deliver bold, sustainable growth of the women's game at elite and grassroots level. The Secretary of State and I recently met Karen to discuss progress to date. I look forward to working closely with her as the review progresses over the coming months. This is a defining period for the women's game, and I want to ensure that the review contributes to the bold and sustainable growth of the game at elite and grassroots level.

Challenges frankly remain for women's and girls' participation in sport. As we have heard, Sport England data showed that the pandemic wiped out all of the gains made in women's sport participation over the previous five years, falling back to just below 60% of women being active. The latest data, published in April this year, showed that men are still more likely to be active compared with women. The latest Sport England data for children and young people from December 2021 is more positive, showing that physical activity levels are very similar for boys and girls in education, with 45% of both defined as active. However, it is clear that more work needs to be done to continue to break down the barriers that prevent women and girls from being active, such as a fear of judgment, safety concerns and a lack of time.

We know that football is a popular choice for women and girls to get active—indeed, it is the most popular team sport for women and girls. Programmes such as Game On, Shooting Stars and Barclays Girls' Football School Partnerships are engaging more girls in football at school—for example, more than 3,200 primary schools participate in the Shooting Stars programme. Initiatives such as Sport England's This Girl Can continue to inspire millions of women to get active, regardless of shape, size, or ability. That campaign has helped to eliminate fear of judgment by normalising women taking part in sport and changing perceptions of what sport is. It also aims to prove that barriers such as time and money can be overcome.

The Lionesses' fantastic performance at the 2022 women's Euros has truly inspired the nation, and it is great to see that confirmed by the recent figures published by UEFA in its post-tournament flash report. For example, more than half of local residents and two in five spectators and tournament volunteers have been inspired to do more sport and physical activity generally, and 84% of those participating in UEFA's women's Euro 2022 legacy activities report that doing so has improved their confidence and self-esteem. We want to build on that momentum.

**Munira Wilson:** The Minister is outlining a lot of fantastic community initiatives. If he is going to come on to this topic, I hope he will forgive me, but could he address some of the questions I asked about working

with the Department for Education to make sure that PE is on the agenda in the way the Lionesses have been pushing for?

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Lady does not have long to wait. We want to build on the momentum that the tournament has created to ensure that every woman and every girl has the opportunity to take part in football if that is what they want to do, and—more importantly—to get active in any way that suits them personally. Our £230 million grassroots investment will be key to achieving that.

The Secretary of State was delighted to meet the Lionesses last month; they are extraordinary ambassadors for sport. We will continue to invest in grassroots sport to bring on the next generation of Lionesses. We know how valuable PE at school is: it gives pupils an opportunity to excel, be active and lead healthy lives. We are actively working with the Department for Education to understand the barriers that prevent the ambition of two to two and a half hours of PE a week being achieved. I commit to personally engaging with my colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure that girls have equal access to sport. We are also reviewing the barriers that prevent girls from getting access to two hours of PE. There is more work for us to do to identify and address the different barriers to participation that exist for young people, and I absolutely commit to making that my priority.

Alongside that, the Department for Education is working on updating the school sport and activity action plan, which will set out actions to improve PE teaching in primary schools and help schools to make better use of their facilities. That will include a £30 million project to open those facilities after hours. More broadly, we need to work with other Departments, such as the Department of Health and Social Care. This is a policy area I care passionately about, and I know that if I do not do something about this issue, I will have far more debates to answer, although I will be happy to do so.

5.28 pm

**Munira Wilson:** I thank Members for participating in the debate. I was told there was a delicious irony in the Member for Twickenham talking about football; I think there is a delicious irony in the fact that four of the seven Members present do not represent English constituencies, but also congratulate the Lionesses and wish them well. I am pleased to see the Scots enjoying English victory.

I thank Members for the important points they made, not least regarding the equalities issue—I wholeheartedly add my support to the comments made about Qatar hosting the World cup. I thank the Minister for his passion and commitment and urge him to keep pressing the Department for Education, particularly on the sport premium. With spending cuts coming down the tracks, that is an easy thing to go after, but it is so important, particularly for less well-off children. Given that we are running out of time, I will end there.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the 2022 UEFA European Women's Football Championship and participation of girls and young women in sport.

5.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statement

*Wednesday 9 November 2022*

## EDUCATION

### Student Loans: Interest Rate Caps

**The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon):** My noble Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance (Baroness Barran), has made the following statement.

I am announcing today an additional temporary reduction to the post-2012 income contingent repayment undergraduate and postgraduate loan interest rates effective as of 1 December 2022.

The Government announced on 13 June 2022 that the student loan interest rate would be set at a maximum of 7.3% between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023, in line with the forecast prevailing market rates. The Government confirmed that should the actual prevailing market rate turn out to be lower than forecast, a further cap would be implemented to reduce student loan interest rates accordingly.

From 1 September 2022 to 30 November 2022, reflecting a lower than forecast prevailing market rate, the maximum interest rate is 6.3% for all post-2012 (plan 2) and postgraduate (plan 3) loans.

I am now announcing a further cap: from 1 December 2022 to 28 February 2023 the maximum interest rate will be 6.5% for all post-2012 (plan 2) and postgraduate (plan 3) loans, reflecting the most recent prevailing market rate. This is a reduction compared to the 7.3% maximum rate announced in June.

From 1 March 2023 to 31 August 2023, the maximum interest rate will be 7.3%. Subject to the prevailing market rate, the Government may announce further caps to apply during this period.

[HCWS363]



# Petition

Wednesday 9 November 2022

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Communal heating systems

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Twickenham,*

Declares that communal boiler schemes are not regulated by Ofgem, and are hence not protected by the cap on energy price rises; further that residents in Twickenham were told that their communal boiler schemes would be a more environmentally friendly and cheaper way of supplying energy; notes that residents have now been informed that the cost of their heating is going to rise by up to 700%; notes that there are over 14,000 heat networks in the UK, supplying as many as 480,000 people who have been left unprotected by the price cap as energy prices skyrocket; and further that a significant number of these homes are classed as social housing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reallocate funds to provide full, immediate financial support to households with communal heating systems, subsidise the excess cost of their bills over the energy price cap set by Ofgem, and to expedite the legislation the Government proposed last year to regulate heat networks in order to protect customers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Munira Wilson, *Official Report*, 7 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 348.]

[P002767]

*Observations from the Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart):*

The energy bill relief scheme (EBRS) for GB and NI will enable the Government to provide financial assistance for all eligible non-domestic customers, including heat network operators, to ensure they are protected from excessively high energy bills over the winter period.

The Government supported price is expected to be £211 per megawatt hour (MWh) for electricity and £75 per MWh for gas, which is less than half of expected wholesale prices this winter.

The price reduction will include charges for electricity and gas used initially from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023. The Energy Prices Act 2022 will require eligible heat network operators to pass on discounts from the EBRS to their consumers. They will also be required to explain how they intend to reduce prices or hold them down if their prices are already low. The Government are using this legislation to appoint the energy ombudsman as a body that consumers can go to this winter, if they are concerned their heat network operator is not meeting the requirements of legislation.

A Treasury-led review has been launched to consider how to support households and businesses with energy bills after April 2023. Further details will be announced in due course.

The Government want heat network consumers to receive equal protection to gas and electricity consumers. That is why the Government introduced the Energy Security Bill on 6 July, which sets out plans to have Ofgem regulate the heat networks sector. Under the proposed regulatory framework, Ofgem will be given new powers to regulate prices in this sector as a matter of priority and the legislation contains the ability for the Government to set minimum efficiency standards for heat networks. This will mean that consumers are charged a fair rate for heating while encouraging investment in heat networks.





# ORAL ANSWERS

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