

**Wednesday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 23 November 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost of Living: Support for Households

2. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support households in Wales with the cost of living. [902327]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): We are delivering unprecedented support to protect households across Wales from the cost of living. We understand that people across the UK are worried about the cost of living, and this winter we will stick with the plan to spend £55 billion to help households and businesses with their energy bills—one of the largest support plans in the whole of Europe.

Ben Lake: I welcome the right hon. Member to his role as Secretary of State for Wales. As he will be aware, off-grid households and businesses have experienced quite rapid increases in the price of their heating. That is a big concern in areas such as Ceredigion, where 74% of properties are not connected to the mains gas grid. Quite simply, when does he expect those households and businesses to receive support for their off-grid heating costs?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the issue of off-grid domestic premises. The Government have heard the issue being raised by Members, including him, and we have increased the support available from £100 to £200. I would be happy to come back to him with details of exactly when that payment will be made. It was because of calls from people such as him that that increase was made.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): This is my first opportunity to congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion, and I wish him well in his new role. Serving in government under his third Prime Minister since September means that he has the dubious honour of collective responsibility for all the decisions made. Of the highest tax burden in 70 years, the biggest forecasted drop in living standards since records began and the longest pay squeeze for more than 150 years, which does he think is doing the most damage to households in Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I am delighted to take full collective responsibility for all the excellent decisions that the last three Prime Ministers have made. May I remind the hon. Lady that we are committing ourselves to spending £55 billion to support the least well-off households across the United Kingdom? Yes, we have had to raise taxes because we have had to pay for a covid crisis that has cost £400 billion; we have had to deal with the effect of the disgraceful invasion of Ukraine, which has pushed up energy bills and pushed up inflation across the United Kingdom; and we have raised taxes to support the most vulnerable. I am yet to hear what she would do to raise money to help people.

Jo Stevens: The Secretary of State cannot hide from his record. He mentioned tax rises. I will make it easy for him: which of the 24 Tory tax rises in this Parliament did he not support?

David T. C. Davies: I am quite happy to support a tax rise to make sure that the living wage goes up. I will support tax rises to make sure that pensions and benefits can go up in line with inflation. What I still have not heard from the hon. Lady, or indeed from the many Labour Members whom I hear on the radio talking about taxation and borrowing, is where exactly they would find the extra money that they want to use to increase spending on public services.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I too welcome the Secretary of State to his place. I am sure that he will join me in expressing llongyfarchiadau—congratulations—to the Wales football team on their performance. If there had only been a third half, we would have been the winners.

The Chancellor told us last week that his financial statement was based on British values. The Wales Governance Centre calculates that, because of failed economic strategies—mostly by his Government—average Welsh incomes will, by 2027, be £10,300 lower than if pre-financial crisis growth levels had been sustained. As the Conservatives prepare to squander another decade, should the people of Wales take it that the British values of the Secretary of State's Government stand for relentless grinding poverty?

David T. C. Davies: In the first instance, I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind words. Of course, I will be happy to say llongyfarchiadau i'r wal goch—congratulations to the red wall—in a few days' time.

As far as the Government's economic policies are concerned, I remind her that the Government have had to deal with the after-effects of a financial collapse partly caused by the previous Labour Government, the effects of a covid crisis that has cost £400 billion, and the effect of a land war in Europe. Despite all that, this Government have quite rightly prioritised the least well off in our society, and I am very proud of our economic record.

Liz Saville Roberts: Today of all days, we must look forward to how the democracy of these isles will best serve our people, particularly the people of Wales. In June, I asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether his so-called Bill of Rights would include the right to self-determination. He did not give me a direct answer, so I will ask the Secretary of State. Will he support the

inclusion in the Bill of Rights of the right to self-determination for the peoples of the devolved nations, or does he not believe that Wales should have the right to decide our own destiny?

David T. C. Davies: Wales has decided its own destiny in several referenda recently. It decided that it would like a devolved Administration, which is something that this Conservative Government will fully support. Wales voted to leave the European Union, which I fully supported, but I am not sure the right hon. Lady or her party did. I fully respect the self-determination of the Welsh people to leave the EU, and I look forward to her support on that one in the future.

Channel 4 Privatisation: Television Production Industry

3. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of Channel 4 privatisation on the television production industry in Wales. [902328]

13. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of Channel 4 privatisation on the television production industry in Wales. [902339]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): The Government are carefully considering the business case for the sale of Channel 4. Whatever the outcome—as I heard from the chair of Teledwyr Annibynol Cymru at the recent S4C 40th anniversary event, the quality of Wales's independent television production sector is unparalleled—I am sure it will continue to thrive.

Chris Elmore: I welcome the Minister to his place and wish him well. He will know that Channel 4 spends more in the nations and regions than any other production company that works in the United Kingdom. Does he not agree that it would be absolute madness to reduce that funding to the Welsh broadcast and television sectors and privatise Channel 4, and does he welcome what it appears will soon be the Prime Minister's U-turn on that rather strange decision?

Dr Davies: The hon. Member will know that the independent television production sector in Wales is thriving, with at least 50 organisations. That needs to continue into the future. The important thing is that Channel 4 can survive in a new landscape, with streaming and competition from abroad.

Liz Twist: I too welcome the Minister to his place. Channel 4's training, apprenticeship and digital skills programme, 4Skills, has reached more than 100,000 people since 2015. How will the Government ensure that this door for young people into the industry is not slammed shut?

Dr Davies: The hon. Lady raises a very important point, and I feel sure that it will be at the forefront of the Government's considerations when they look at the business case and the implications of Channel 4 privatisation.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to praise the work of production companies, not only in Cardiff but Aberystwyth and elsewhere in Wales? Is he aware that some of those companies are frustrated with Channel 4 and feel that they cannot get a look in? Some of them would welcome a change of management.

Dr Davies: Those considerations will need to be a subject of the review. The important thing to emphasise is the long list of productions from Wales that we all know well, and we must see that continue.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the appointment of my hon. Friend, who is surely one of the ablest Ministers in His Majesty's Government. I would be interested to know of his recent assessments of the television production industry in Wales and the ever-expanding Media City in Greater Manchester.

Dr Davies: My hon. Friend will know much more about that particular issue than me, but Manchester is near to north Wales, and the success of Manchester influences media performance within north Wales.

Bill of Rights: Self-determination for Wales

4. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Bill of Rights on the right for self-determination for Wales. [902329]

14. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Bill of Rights on the right for self-determination for Wales. [902340]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Bill of Rights will continue to protect the same rights and freedoms currently in place, but will restore a common-sense approach to human rights, safeguarding the public interest and respecting the will of Parliament.

Deidre Brock: Secretaries of State, previously and just now, have failed to answer the question from the Plaid Cymru leader, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), on this, so I will have another go. The right to self-determination is set out in article 1 of the international covenant on civil and political rights. Will the proposed British Bill of Rights uphold that by enshrining the right to self-determination for the peoples of Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland?

David T. C. Davies: The Bill of Rights is clearly a reserved matter for the UK Government. The UK Government will always respect the right of devolved Administrations to legislate in areas for which they are responsible, and we would assume that the devolved Administrations will respect the right of the UK Government to legislate in areas for which they are responsible. That is what respect and self-determination are all about.

Owen Thompson: Again, I do not think that got to the point. The Joint Committee on Human Rights recommended in its report last year that the UK Government should "not pursue reform" of the Human Rights Act

“without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd and the Northern Ireland Assembly.”

As the UK Government have failed to get that consent, does the Minister not see the vital need for devolved nations to have a right to self-determination enshrined in law?

David T. C. Davies: I think the devolved nations, such as Wales, will be very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary is bringing in legislation that will stop the ridiculous time-wasting of people taking endless appeals, at public expense, to the courts to challenge judicial decisions. The Bill of Rights will not take away fundamental freedoms, such as the right to wear the suffragette colours in the national Parliament, which Members of the hon. Gentleman's party should support in their own Chamber.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill of Rights places the Supreme Court at the top of the decision-making tree for rights, and so does our constitutional settlement as regards the devolved nations? Does he agree that we would look to the Supreme Court for correct, rightful decisions in this area, as we have just seen in another context?

David T. C. Davies: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. It is incumbent on all of us in this Chamber to support the decisions of the court, as I am sure all of us do.

Welsh Lamb Exports to the USA

6. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the export of Welsh lamb to the United States.

[902332]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): I was delighted to hear that the first shipment of British lamb left Wales for the USA last month. The USA lamb market is estimated to be worth £37 million over the next five years, with over 300 million consumers who can now access and enjoy our world-renowned Welsh lamb.

Mr Hollobone: It is great that Welsh lamb has now been exported to the United States for the first time in 20 years. The National Farmers Union has set out a detailed strategy outlining its ambition to grow the UK's food, drink and agricultural exports by 30% by 2030. Will the Minister work with the NFU to realise this laudable ambition to drive the total value of British agrifoods exports to more than £30 billion by that date?

Dr Davies: I certainly will. I look forward to attending the royal Welsh winter fair next week, when I will be meeting the NFU. Wales has a major role in achieving increased exports and, when it comes to lamb, trade deals with the Gulf Co-operation Council, among others, could be key.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I too welcome the Minister to his new role. He will know how important lamb exports are to Welsh farmers and the Welsh economy. Exports to the US are a drop in the

ocean compared to the damage his Government have done with the Australian and New Zealand trade deals. We know his colleague the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said:

“I no longer have to put such a positive gloss on what was agreed...the Australia trade deal is not actually a very good deal...We did not need to give Australia or New Zealand full liberalisation in beef and sheep—it was not in our economic interest to do so”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Will the Minister now admit his Government have sold out Welsh farmers?

Dr Davies: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that we import more from Ireland than from Australia. In fact, the Australian and New Zealand markets are very much in the rapidly expanding markets of south-east Asia. We need to look at the pros and cons of trade deals, and there are certainly many pros to the trade deals for the British economy.

Energy Security

7. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on energy security in Wales.

[902333]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): Wales plays a critical role, with two of the UK's three liquefied natural gas terminals supplying gas through Pembrokeshire to the grid. Wales is well placed to build on that record, with prime sites for new nuclear projects in north Wales and floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. We will continue to champion these opportunities across Government.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Off-grid households in Wales, including many in my constituency, are still waiting for an announcement on how they will receive support with rising costs. The ongoing cost of living crisis is not the only issue. People who rely on off-grid energy are hostages to what has become an increasingly unstable market, and it is only set to get worse. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, does the Minister believe that, where the previous Government have failed, it is finally time for this Government to back new renewable energy, such as Swansea Council's Blue Eden lagoon project that will get a grip on a tidal lagoon in Swansea?

Dr Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I would be interested to read more about the Blue Eden project, which I understand has had community renewal funding to look at the prospect of it progressing. I will certainly follow it with great interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Stephen Crabb.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): At the Welsh Affairs Committee this morning, we heard from the Minister for Energy and Climate on the enormous potential of floating offshore wind to contribute to UK energy security. On a day when Port Talbot and Milford Haven are launching their joint freeport bid to deliver this new industry, I urge my hon. Friend to throw his weight behind unleashing the potential of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea.

Dr Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for the question. I had a meeting yesterday with a developer who is interested in floating offshore wind, which has the potential to contribute massively to the renewable energy requirements of this country, and south-west Wales is key to that.

Cost of Living: Support for Households

8. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of financial support for households in Wales. [902334]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have frequent discussions with my ministerial colleagues on a range of matters, including the cost of living. I am pleased to say that this year, as a result of the autumn statement, the Government will be spending £55 billion to help households and businesses with their energy bills. We have also announced further support for 2023-24 so that the most vulnerable households will continue to be supported.

Carolyn Harris: Swansea East-based charity Faith in Families supports 500 households a week who are struggling to pay for food, energy and living costs. Currently, it raises money to provide vouchers for toys so that children will be able to open a gift on Christmas morning. The Everyone Deserves a Christmas campaign, which is also based in Swansea, is desperately trying to raise funds to provide festive hampers for those families. Community organisations are doing their bit to ensure that nobody goes without this Christmas. What will the Government do?

David T. C. Davies: First, I commend the hon. Lady for her support for the hamper campaign. I believe that my office has sent out hampers, possibly as part of the same campaign that she has championed, and I am sure other hon. Members may want to do so. On the wider issue, we all accept that a Christmas hamper is not going to solve economic problems, so I refer her back to my earlier answer, which was that the Government have done absolutely everything possible to target help at the least well-off in society. That is why in addition to the inflation-linked increases to pensions and benefits, and to the living wage, the Government have made sure that those on benefits will receive a payment of £900, pensioners will get £300, and households where there are people with disabilities will get £150. We are proud of our record on doing our best for those with the least.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his position. He just highlighted the range of generous support that has been made available to households facing the energy crisis, but park home residents are still waiting for clarification about how they will receive their support. The Government have clearly made strong, warm commitments to park home residents. When will they be in a position to explain, technically, how the money will be paid to those households?

David T. C. Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words. I note that he has raised the issue on a number of occasions. I am told that details are forthcoming imminently on that particular point, and I am sure that

other colleagues on the Front Bench, who are more directly involved in that, have heard his question and will respond to him shortly.

High Speed 2: Welsh Economy

9. **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of HS2 on the Welsh economy. [902335]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a wide range of transport measures, including High Speed 2. HS2 will enable quicker and more train services to north Wales via the Crewe northern connection, and will improve connections from north Wales to the HS2 network, potentially bringing passengers within two hours 15 minutes of London.

Tony Lloyd: The Secretary of State must recognise, though, that north Wales in particular can obtain the benefit of HS2 only with proper connectivity, which means electrification of the north Wales line. Will he guarantee that that will take place? If not, will he accept that that is a betrayal of the interests of the people of north Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I do not necessarily think that it would require electrification of the north Wales line. With respect, there are proposals at the moment to make improvements to the north Wales line that are based more around changes to signalling, which will allow more trains to run on the track. I do not pretend to be a rail engineer, but the proposals I have seen do not include electrification. They would decrease journey times across the north Wales line and, feeding into Crewe, would therefore decrease journey times between north Wales and London and bring benefits to all passengers.

Deposit Return Schemes: Drinks Containers

10. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with the Welsh Government on co-ordinating work to set up deposit return schemes for drinks containers. [902336]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): My right hon. Friend has long championed a deposit return scheme since her time as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regularly discusses co-ordination of the implementation of the scheme with the Welsh Government, and it was an agenda item at the recent EFRA inter-ministerial group, which I attended.

Theresa Villiers: This is a really important scheme that will help tackle plastic waste and litter. People want it to be introduced, and it will be much more successful if it is co-ordinated between Cardiff, Edinburgh and London. Please can the Government make progress on delivering it right across the United Kingdom?

Dr Davies: I could not agree more. Non-aligned deposit return schemes across the UK risk creating barriers to trade, breaking up supply chains, increasing

costs to business, and reducing the choice and availability of products in Wales. In recent days, I have met the Society of Independent Brewers, British Glass, the Wine and Spirit Trade Association and UKHospitality to discuss these issues, and I will be doing all I can to encourage UK-wide co-ordination.

Freeports

11. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support the development of freeports in Wales. [902337]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I met officials from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities last week to discuss this very subject, and I feel confident that there are going to be several high-quality bids from Wales. The bidding process closes tomorrow at 6 pm, and I look forward to the announcement being made early in 2023.

Virginia Crosbie: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place—croeso. Will he join me in thanking all those who support Anglesey's bid to become a freeport, and does he agree that a freeport in Wales delivers on our Conservative manifesto commitment and will strengthen Wales's bond with the UK Government and our important Union?

David T. C. Davies: I am absolutely delighted to agree with my hon. Friend, and indeed to thank all those who have been involved in freeport bids across the whole of Wales. Freeports have the potential to spread wealth across the areas in which they are established, they deliver on the Government's commitment to level up and they are an example of the benefits of Wales being a part of the Union. I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend, who has spoken on this issue on 26 occasions, and I look forward to that announcement being made in February.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): We have seen many claims about the number of jobs that will be created in Holyhead. Can the Secretary of State give me a precise assessment or even a wild guess as to how many jobs will be created, how many of them will be new and how many will be merely transferred from other areas?

David T. C. Davies: I have certain powers as Secretary of State, but the powers of absolute clairvoyance are not among them. Therefore, I find it rather difficult to give an exact figure for the number of jobs that would be created as a result of any one of the many projects that the Government are doing to level up across the United Kingdom. What I can tell the hon. Member is that, where freeports have been trialled in Humber and Teesside, they have created thousands of new jobs, and I look forward to seeing something similar happen no matter where a freeport is established in Wales.

Access to Grassroots Sports

12. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): Whether he has had recent discussions with the Welsh Government on supporting access to grassroots sports in Wales. [902338]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):

As a keen sportsman, I was absolutely delighted to visit the new 3G pitch at Baglan field. It received funds from the UK Government's multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister championed when Chancellor. I look forward to meeting Welsh Government Ministers next week to discuss this and other issues around sports, as we cheer on our heroes in *tîm Cymru a'r wal goch*—team Wales and the red wall.

Simon Baynes: UK Government funding for grassroots football facilities in Clwyd South this year has included £57,000 for upgrading the pitch at Ysgol y Grango for the community hub, and £20,000 for Penycae football club, which is helping re-establish a girls team. Does my right hon. Friend agree that grassroots sport is vital for the health, wellbeing and quality of life of all our communities?

David T. C. Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why we have allocated £1.3 million to 17 projects in Wales to make vital improvements to changing room facilities and artificial grass surfaces. Sports clubs are at the heart of every community in Wales, and Wales is at the heart of every decision taken by this Government and this Prime Minister.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): As people up and down Wales celebrate Wales's success and wish them the best for the next couple of matches, this is an ideal and unparalleled opportunity to galvanise that enthusiasm and develop grassroots football in Wales. The Football Association of Wales tells me that £12 million has been earmarked by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for the development of the sport over the next few years, but it could be threatened by the cuts announced last week by the Chancellor. Will the Secretary of State please speak to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and beg her to safeguard that money for the development of grassroots football in Wales?

David T. C. Davies: The Government have already shown their commitment to sport—not just football but many other sports—through the funds disbursed by DCMS across the United Kingdom. I am sure that right hon. colleagues will have heard the hon. Lady's comments, but I assure her of our commitment to grassroots sports across Wales and the United Kingdom. I look forward to joining her to support *tîm Cymru a'r wal goch wythnos nesaf*. *Diolch. (Translation: I look forward to joining her to support team Wales and the red wall next week. Thank you.)*

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902411] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 23 November.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I know that Members across the House will want to join me in wishing both England and Wales the best of luck in the World cup.

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.

Jonathan Gullis: People in places such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke are not getting the help that they need quickly enough when it comes to mental health. Fellow campaigner James Starkie and I were delighted when the Prime Minister, who was then Chancellor, said he would back our campaign every step of the way to get mental health nurses into GP surgeries. Will the Prime Minister deliver on his promise, back our “No Time to Wait” pilot scheme developed by the Royal College of Nursing and help get people the support that they need?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for his continued campaigning on this important issue? I am pleased to tell him that all 1,250 primary care networks in England are entitled to recruit up to two mental health practitioners to work in surgeries. I know that the British Medical Association and the NHS are looking at expanding that, and I look forward to working with him to ensure that his constituents in Stoke get the mental health support and care that they need.

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

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Congratulations to England and Wales on their start to the World cup, and good luck for the rest of the tournament. The World cup does not belong to FIFA, and it does not belong to the host nation; it belongs to everyone who loves football. It is totally unacceptable that, during this tournament, gay football fans are unable to acknowledge who they love, and players have been threatened with suspension if they show solidarity with those fans. Shame on FIFA.

Britain faces the lowest growth of any OECD nation over the next two years. Why?

The Prime Minister: Since 2010, this country has experienced the third highest growth in the G7; this year, the fastest growth in the G7, and unemployment at a multi-decade low. We are getting on to deliver more growth. We are delivering freeports. We are investing in apprenticeships. We are protecting research and development. If the Labour party is serious about supporting growth, maybe it should get on the phone with its union paymasters and tell them to call off the strikes.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, we are—

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. We want to get through Prime Minister's questions and you are not helping me.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is in total denial. We are bottom of the 38 OECD countries, which are all in the same boat when it comes to covid and Ukraine, and he wants a pat on the back. It is like a football manager, bottom of the league at Christmas, celebrating an away draw three months ago—it will not wash. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not like their

record—that is the problem. So, let us try another way. Why is Britain set to be the first country into recession and the last country out?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the right hon. and learned Gentleman brought up the OECD report, because it contained three very important points. First, it made the point that in the years following the pandemic we are projected to have almost the highest growth among our peer countries. It also made the point that it was crystal clear that the challenges we face are completely international in nature. Thirdly, it supported our fiscal plan because it is credible and ensures sustainability. The right hon. and learned Gentleman would have known all that if he had actually read the whole report, but he is not interested in substance. He is an opportunist.

In four weeks, I have strengthened the economy, we have put more money into the NHS and schools, and we have delivered a deal to tackle illegal migration. In the same four weeks, all we have—

Mr Speaker: Order. Prime Minister, when I stand, you have to sit down. You came to me, quite rightly, and said to me, “We want to get through Prime Minister's questions. I'm going to give short answers.” Please stick to what you said.

Keir Starmer: There is only one party that crashed on the economy and it is sitting there on the Government Benches. And I noticed this, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister will not say why Britain is set to be the first into a recession and the last out, so I will: 12 years of Tory failure, followed by 12 weeks of Tory chaos. For a decade, they let our economy drift aimlessly, before suddenly cutting the parachute ropes and slamming it to the ground. And because of the changes he has made, a typical household will end up with tax increases of £1,400. *[Interruption.]* Tory Members do not want to hear about the tax increases of £1,400. Contrast that with a super wealthy non-dom living here but holding their income overseas. How much more—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Young, I do not need anymore—I do not need shouting, I do not need pointing. You are meant to be a good example when you sit on the Front Bench. Just because you are on the second, do not spoil what you are meant to do.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, I do not think Tory Members want to hear this. Because of the changes the Prime Minister has made, a typical household will end up paying tax increases of £1,400. Contrast that with a super wealthy non-dom living here but holding their income overseas. How much more has he asked them to pay?

Mr Speaker: Order. As I said to the Prime Minister, so I say to the Leader of the Opposition: I have to get through this list. I need you both to help me and to think of other Members.

The Prime Minister: Labour had 13 years to address this issue and did nothing. It was a Conservative Government who took action and tightened the rules. The problem with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's idea is that it would end up “costing Britain money”—not my words, but the words of a former Labour shadow

Chancellor. Rather than peddling fairy tales and gesture politics, let us tell him what we are doing to deliver for this country: a record increase in the national living wage; protecting millions from energy bills; and protecting the pensioners' triple lock. That is what we are doing for this country.

Keir Starmer: If the Conservatives had grown the economy at the same rate as the last Labour Government, we would have tens of billions of pounds more to spend. It was not a trick question. The answer is that the Prime Minister has not asked non-doms to pay a penny more. He talks about the money. Every year that is £3.6 billion thrown away because he will not make them pay their taxes here. How many extra doctors could Britain afford with that money?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the right hon. and learned Gentleman brought up doctors, because last week we delivered record increases in funding for the NHS—not just more doctors, but more nurses, more scans, more operations. That shows our “commitment to prioritise to NHS”—not my words, but the words of the NHS chief executive.

Keir Starmer: Scrapping the non-dom status would allow us to train 15,000 doctors every year—that is what Labour would do. We can carry on handing out tax breaks to the super-rich, or we can live in a society where people do not have to go private to get a doctor's appointment. It is that simple.

The Prime Minister also hands Shell 90p for every £1 that it spends on drilling, so it has not paid a penny in windfall tax. You may have seen this week, Mr Speaker, that somebody shredded £10,000 in protest at those propping up an oil and gas giant, but the Prime Minister shreds £10,000 every other minute propping them up. Which does he think is the more absurd?

The Prime Minister: This is the Government who have actually put in place an economic plan that will deliver confidence and stability to our economy. All I have heard from the right hon. and learned Gentleman today is that he has no answers and no substance, because there is no plan. He talks about the NHS; we are delivering record funding for the NHS, but we can only do that on the foundations of a strong economy. You cannot deliver for the NHS unless you have a plan for the economy, and he does not have either.

Keir Starmer: Every time the Prime Minister opens his mouth, another powerful business voice says that he has not got a plan on growth. The failure of the last 12 years and the chaos of the last 12 weeks are compounded by the decisions he is taking now. He will not follow Labour's plan to scrap non-dom status—instead, we have an NHS staffing crisis. He will not follow Labour's plan to make oil and gas giants pay their fair share—instead, he hammers working people. And he will not push through planning reform—instead, he kills off the dream of home ownership. He is too weak to take on his party, too weak to take on vested interest. Twelve long years of Tory Government, five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors—why do they always clobber working people?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about leadership. This summer, I stood on my principles and told the country what they needed

to hear, even though it was difficult. When he ran for leader, he told his party what it wanted to hear, and even now, he says one thing and does the other. He says that he cares for working people, but he will not stand up to the unions. He said that he would honour Brexit, but he tried to have a second referendum. And now he tries to talk tough about immigration, but he promised to defend free movement. You can trust him to deliver for his party; you can trust me to deliver for the country.

Q3. [902413] Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): As we debate how to best help our constituents with their energy costs, 10 million people in Ukraine are without power due to Russia's barbaric strikes on the country's energy infrastructure. Will my right hon. Friend set out what support we will provide to our Ukrainian allies to help them to repair the damage and keep their citizens warm this winter?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that I spent time discussing that with President Zelensky at the weekend and talking to Ukrainian families about the impact that these awful strikes are having on them. I know that the whole House will be proud to know that we are providing millions of pounds of immediate support, with generators, shelter and water repairs, on top of the 570 mobile power generators that we are donating to power facilities across Ukraine. We are also working with the Government to repair critical infrastructure, with eight projects identified by UK Export Finance to be delivered in the near future.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the Scottish National party.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure that the whole House will join me in welcoming the Moderator of the Church of Scotland to our proceedings this afternoon and in thanking him for his sermon at St Margaret's this morning.

This morning, the Supreme Court clarified a point of law, but the very point of democracy in this Union is now at stake. And democracy will not be denied, because whether Westminster likes it or not, last year the people of Scotland voted for a Scottish Parliament with the majority and the mandate to deliver an independence referendum. The Prime Minister has every right to oppose independence; he has no right to deny democracy to the people of Scotland. If the Prime Minister keeps blocking that referendum, will he at least be honest and confirm that the very idea that the United Kingdom is a voluntary Union of nations is now dead and buried?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by saying that we respect the clear and definitive ruling of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and that I am looking forward to seeing the Moderator of the Church of Scotland tomorrow. I think that the people of Scotland want us working on fixing the major challenges that collectively we face, whether that is the economy, supporting the NHS or indeed supporting Ukraine. Now is the time for politicians to work together, and that is what this Government will do.

Ian Blackford: It is right that we respect the decision of the Court, but the Prime Minister cannot claim to respect the rule of law and then deny democracy in the

very same breath. If democracy is to matter, if elections matter, then mandates matter. Since 2014, the Scottish National party has won eight elections in a row. Last year, we won a landslide. The Scottish Parliament now has the biggest majority for an independence referendum in the history of devolution. The Prime Minister does not even have a personal mandate to sit in 10 Downing Street. What right does a man with no mandate have to deny Scottish democracy?

The Prime Minister: When it comes to Scottish democracy, I am pleased that the Scottish Government have one of the most powerful devolved assemblies anywhere in the world. I was pleased, very shortly after becoming Prime Minister, to be the first Prime Minister in over a decade to attend the British-Irish Council and sit down with the First Minister to explore ways in which we can work together with the Scottish Government to deliver for the people of Scotland, whether that is delivering our growth deals, delivering freeports or ensuring that the £1.5 billion of extra Barnett money can go towards supporting public services. That is what we are committed to doing in Scotland.

Q6. [902417] Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Last month, Just Stop Oil clambered up the Dartford crossing, causing chaos for days. It then attacked artworks, the M25 and anything else it could to cause misery and mayhem. These people are not protesters; they are criminals. Will the Prime Minister therefore consider making Just Stop Oil a proscribed organisation so that it can be treated as the criminal organisation it is?

The Prime Minister: The kinds of demonstrations that we have seen recently disrupt people's daily lives, cause mass misery for the public and put people in danger. The police have our full support in their efforts to minimise this disruption and tackle reckless and illegal activity. The Public Order Bill will give them the powers they need. I look forward to seeing the support that the Bill receives from every part of this House.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): My constituent Vanessa has contacted me in floods of tears. Her mortgage payments have risen by £500 a month. She and her husband were already struggling with high energy bills and high food bills; now, like one in four mortgage holders across the country, they fear losing their home. "We are out of options and heartbroken," says Vanessa. Will the Prime Minister introduce a new mortgage protection fund, paid for by reversing his tax cuts for the banks? Will he help Vanessa to keep her home?

The Prime Minister: I am deeply sorry to hear about Vanessa's circumstances. I want her to know that the plan that the Chancellor announced last week will help families like hers up and down the country, because it is the right plan to tackle inflation, limit the increase in mortgage rates and ensure confidence in our economy. There is specific help that the Chancellor announced, offering low-interest loans to homeowners on benefits to cover interest on mortgages of up to £250,000. The Chancellor is also meeting mortgage lenders in the coming weeks. We will continue to do all we can to support those homeowners who are struggling with their payments.¹

1. [Official Report, 1 December 2022, Vol. 723, c. 10MC.]

Q8. [902419] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I recently took part in the Pitching In campaign, which promotes grassroots sport and celebrates the volunteers who make it possible every week. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking those volunteers for their incredible work? With top-flight football taking a bit of a break at the moment because of the World cup, will he also join me in reminding people that this is the perfect opportunity to go out and support their incredibly welcoming local non-league football teams, including Atherstone Town community football club, Bedworth United and Coleshill Town in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in praising all his local teams. He makes an excellent point that volunteers have a vital role to play in community sport and the delivery of major events. I join him in thanking them for everything that they do. Sport accounts for over half of volunteering in the UK, and every one volunteer generates the capacity for at least eight more people to participate in sport. I know that the whole House will join me in praising their efforts.

Q2. [902412] Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Since 2014, the SNP has won eight elections. We now have more councillors, Members of the Scottish Parliament and MPs in this place than any other Scottish political party. Every one of those elected Members was elected on a manifesto and clear mandate for Scottish independence. What democratic right do the Government have to deny Scottish democracy, refuse an independence referendum and keep us shackled and imprisoned in this involuntary and unequal Union against the will of the Scottish people?

The Prime Minister: Again, we respect the decision of the Court today with regard to the referendum and we are getting on with the business of working constructively, collaboratively and in partnership with the Scottish Government to deliver for the hon. Member's constituents. Indeed, the Ayrshire growth deal is investing over £100 million to make use of his region's strong industrial heritage, potentially making more use of renewable energy. That is the kind of positive project that we should be focused on, and that is what we will keep on delivering.

Q9. [902420] John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The Prime Minister has rightly promised to recruit a successor to Lord Geidt as his ethics adviser promptly, but does he accept that threats to integrity are often broader than the job description of the Prime Minister's adviser on the ministerial code, and will he therefore commit to introducing the additional measures in the new five-point integrity plan on topics such as lobbying and conflicts of interests, developed with organisations such as Transparency International and Spotlight on Corruption, to show that he will walk the talk and put party integrity and Government integrity at the heart of our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comprehensive and thoughtful suggestions. As he acknowledged, I have committed to appointing an

independent adviser on ministerial interests, and I very much look forward to studying his other proposals in proper time.

Q4. [902414] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Just three months ago, this appointed interim Prime Minister said in Scotland:

“We live in a Union, which is of course there by consent and by democracy, and I accept that”.

By their consent and by democracy the Scottish people have already voted by a clear majority in the Scottish Parliament to have their say through a referendum on an independent future for Scotland. It begs the ultimate question: can the Prime Minister tell us whether he accepts Scottish democracy and, if so, how that is compatible with today's Supreme Court ruling, which clearly exposes the myth that the UK is a voluntary Union and is upheld by consent?

The Prime Minister: At a time such as this, the Scottish people want to see their Governments working together on the things that matter to them. I believe that that is possible. The hon. Member should know that in his own constituency we have been able to support culture and tourism, working together to bring the V&A to Dundee. That is an example of a positive project. It demonstrates the benefits of the Union, and that is what we will keep on delivering.

Q10. [902421] Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Government provide slim financial support across five firms for small modular reactors. A few other countries have woken up and are seriously investing in SMRs. As Sizewell will not be running until 2031 at the earliest, should we not be doing the same?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Hopefully he was heartened to hear what the Chancellor said last week: that we want to crack on with our overall nuclear programme. My hon. Friend is right to acknowledge that small modular and advanced nuclear reactors have the potential to play a key role in that nuclear programme, alongside projects such as Hinkley and Sizewell. That is why we have allocated £385 million to support them. Like him, I am keen to see progress as soon as possible.

Q5. [902416] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): During the 2014 referendum, we were told that Scotland was an equal partner in a family of nations, yet the disaster that is Brexit was forced on Scotland against our will, and we have seen devolution wound back by legislation such as the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. So if the Prime Minister still claims that the UK is a voluntary Union, can he explain the democratic route by which the people of Scotland get to make a choice over their own future?

The Prime Minister: The UK is a collaborative and constructive Union that is delivering for the people of Scotland, even in Ayrshire itself, where we are working collaboratively with the Scottish Government to invest in aerospace, advanced manufacturing and space. Those are the types of activities that will bring tangible benefits to the people in the hon. Lady's region, and that is the right focus for the Government.

Q11. [902422] Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): As a North Yorkshire MP, my right hon. Friend will know how crucial bus services are to our communities. Last month, Arriva stopped the only bus between Selby and Doncaster, meaning that 40 Selby College students had to find alternative transport at very short notice. Thankfully, the college itself stepped in to resolve the situation. Additionally, across North Yorkshire around 80 other bus services are now under threat. Can my right hon. Friend advise what action he will take to ensure that essential services are not withdrawn at short notice, and to ensure that they continue to be operated across the Selby district and wider North Yorkshire?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows that I share exactly the same challenge in our rural areas of making sure that our constituents have access to the bus services they need. I am pleased that the Chancellor has allocated funding for extra bus services across the country, and I look forward to working with him to ensure that that money finds its way to rural areas such as North Yorkshire to provide the connectivity that is so important for people to have opportunity and get access to public services.

Q7. [902418] Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Tomorrow marks one year since 32 people lost their lives in the channel. New evidence suggests that the boat reached British waters and that the French and British authorities knew that it was in distress for a very long time. Families are still waiting for answers from the marine accident investigation branch. Why has this investigation taken so long? Will the Prime Minister commit to a full public inquiry afterwards, and does he concede that this would not have happened if there were safe and legal routes into the UK?

The Prime Minister: Every life that is lost in the channel is a tragedy, but that is why it is so vital that we break the cycle of criminal gangs that are exploiting people and trafficking them, and that is what the Home Secretary is focused on. We have accepted more than 380,000 people over the past few years, because this is a place where people can seek refuge and sanctuary, but we must be able to do that in a sustainable way, and that is why it is right that we tackle illegal migration.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Rising energy bills are a challenge for all of us. My constituents are grateful for the support that has been given by the Government, but with temperatures this week falling below freezing in Lincolnshire, those living in park homes are particularly concerned about when they will receive their support. Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister tell me when and how people living in park homes will receive the £400 to which they are entitled?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has consistently and rightly championed her rural constituents, making sure they get access to the energy support that we are providing. This is something that the Chancellor prioritised in last week's autumn statement, and I will ensure that we get the money out as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend should also be reassured that the cold weather

payment system provides extra financial support to those vulnerable constituents when temperatures drop below a certain point.

Q12. [902423] **Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Did Scotland vote for Brexit? No. Did Scotland vote for austerity? No. Did Scotland vote for the Tories? No. What we did vote for—[*Interruption.*] Don't shout me down—[*Interruption.*] Don't shout me down; I have listened to all of you. What we did vote for, only last year, was the right to choose our own future. With that in mind, and given the previous non-answer by the Prime Minister, can he tell this House—tell us all, in fact—how a nation can leave this so-called voluntary Union?

The Prime Minister: The challenges we face right now are those that require co-operation between our Governments: tackling the economy and supporting the NHS. I am pleased that last week's autumn statement means that the Scottish Government will receive £1.5 billion in extra funding to deliver for public services in Scotland, and that is what we will continue doing.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Scotland is a proud nation with a unique heritage. It is a valued member of our family of nations—a Union of people bound through the generations by shared interests. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this morning's Supreme Court decision gives the Scottish nationalists—the SNP—the opportunity, for once, to put the people of Scotland first and end their obsession with breaking us apart?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend puts it very well.

Q13. [902424] **Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Prime Minister will not answer, but it is obvious that the route to Scottish independence is now elections, and we know there will be many of them.

Inequality has a cost. In France, middle earners earn 20% more than those in the UK, and low earners earn 25% more. This inequality is why the cost of energy and the cost of living are hitting people worse in the UK—incidentally, that is why I am for independence, so that we can choose a better path. In the meantime, in my constituency there are both more off-grid fuel customers and a higher rate of fuel poverty than in Northern Ireland. Will the Prime Minister do the right thing and extend the £200 payment that is going to Northern Ireland to the off-grid customers in my geographically distinct constituency in the Hebrides on the basis of fairness—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Last week's autumn statement announced £55 billion to support families and businesses across the United Kingdom with their energy bills. The Chancellor paid particular attention to off-grid customers in rural areas by doubling their support to £200, which will help many people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and across the United Kingdom.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sure that this weekend we will both be celebrating what we consider to be one of the best days of the year: Lancashire Day. May I thank you personally for hosting the event in Parliament? Will the Prime Minister, although he represents a Yorkshire constituency, join me in welcoming our Lancastrian local leaders and businesses to Parliament today, and will he join us in supporting our proud history and bright future by levelling up what we consider to be the best county?

The Prime Minister: I offer my best wishes to my hon. Friend, and indeed to you, Mr Speaker, for Lancashire Day. I can put local rivalry aside on this occasion to join my hon. Friend in thanking Lancastrians for their contribution to our country, and I wish her the very best for today's event.

Q14. [902425] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What we have heard from the Prime Minister today is, in essence, that no matter how Scotland votes, Westminster will decide, but democracy demands differently. The late Canon Kenyon Wright said:

“What if that other voice we all know so well responds by saying, ‘We say no, and we are the state’? Well we say yes—and we are the people.”

It is the people in Scotland who have to be heard. This place cannot stand in the way of democracy. If this Prime Minister with no mandate thinks it can, is he seriously telling us that this is a voluntary Union of equals?

The Prime Minister: We are focused not on the SNP but on the people of Scotland; that is who we are delivering for. I am happy to meet the First Minister, as I continue to do, to deliver for the people of Scotland, including in the hon. Lady's constituency through the growth deal, and also by moving civil service jobs, creating freeports and providing extra funding for public services. This is a Government who will deliver for the people of Scotland, and we will do it constructively and collaboratively.

Speaker's Statement

12.33 pm

Mr Speaker: On 20 October, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee published a special report on answers given to it by the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) when she was Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) subsequently wrote to me asking for precedence for a complaint of a breach of privilege, as was his right. I declined to do so since the bar for such a complaint is high. The House should take action only when essential in order to provide reasonable protection for the House, its Members or its officers from improper obstruction. I note that the Committee itself, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, has said:

“Had Ms Dorries remained Secretary of State, driving a policy of selling the channel, we may have sought a referral to the Privileges Committee but, as her claims have not inhibited the work of the Committee and she no longer has a position of power over the future of Channel 4, we are, instead, publishing this Report to enable the House, and its Members, to draw their own conclusions.”

So I considered it appropriate to respect the Committee's assessment of the situation.

Correspondence on matters of privilege is private. Indeed, I go to great lengths to ensure that Members can write to me in confidence on any matter, knowing that their communication will remain private. I expect the same courtesy with my replies. The hon. Member has seen fit to give a partial and biased account of my letter on Twitter, and I await his apology. I gave the hon. Member notice that I would be raising this matter at this time, but I do stress that it is not the way we should be doing business in this House.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As you have just explained, Mr Speaker, the DCMS Committee, on which I sit, published a unanimous cross-party report about the testimony given to us by the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), and there is now considerable public interest in what should happen next. I want to put on record that I deplore social media pile-ons against you, or indeed

anyone else—I have been on the receiving end of them, and they are exceedingly unpleasant. But could I ask for guidance on what I and other Members should tell our constituents about integrity in politics in this context? If someone misleads a Committee, what should happen next?

Mr Speaker: First of all, printing the letter, and only half the letter, is not integrity; in fact, it is far from it. It misled the people of this country, and it certainly put me in a bad light with the people of this country, and I do not expect that to happen, as an impartial Speaker. If that was an apology, I do not think it was very good.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to that, hon. Members of this House have certain strict duties on them. First, there is a duty to uphold the institutions of this House. Clearly, in breaching the confidentiality of the Speaker's private correspondence, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) has knowingly broken that rule. If that was an apology, it was not sufficient for that alone, frankly.

We also have a duty to tell the truth. In the hon. Gentleman's public pronouncements, he implicitly criticised you, Mr Speaker, for not referring the Secretary of State to the Privileges Committee, but you were simply following the convention of agreeing with the Select Committee, of which he is a member. When the Committee decided not to refer, there was no minority report from him. There was not even a vote against from him; it was a unanimous vote. What he was trying to do was blame you, through his partial release of the letter, and lead the public to believe that somehow you made this decision against the wishes of the Committee.

The rules of this House do not allow me to assert whether I view the misleading of the public as deliberate, so the House can make its own judgment on that, but this miserable half-apology was completely inadequate for this breach.

Mr Speaker: I am going to leave it there for today, and I hope the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire will consider the way he has put his own part.

Scottish Referendum Legislation: Supreme Court Decision

12.39 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the decision of the Supreme Court and the rights of the Scottish Parliament to call for an independence referendum.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for providing me with the opportunity to address the House on this important ruling of the Supreme Court on the issue of the competence of the Scottish Parliament to legislate for a referendum on independence.

The UK Supreme Court has today determined that it is outside the powers of the Scottish Parliament to hold an independence referendum, and I respect the Court's clear and definitive ruling on this matter. The Scottish Government's Lord Advocate referred this question to the Supreme Court, which has today given its judgment, and the UK Government's position has always been clear: that it would be outside the Scottish Parliament's competence to legislate for a referendum on Scottish independence because it is a matter wholly reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament.

We welcome the Court's unanimous and unequivocal ruling, which supports the United Kingdom Government's long-standing position on this matter. People want to see the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government focus on issues that matter to them, not on constitutional division. People across Scotland rightly want and expect to see both their Governments—the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government—working together with a relentless focus on the issues that matter to them, their families and their communities.

The Prime Minister has been very clear, and has demonstrated since day one, that it is our duty to work constructively with the Scottish Government. We fully respect the devolution settlement and we want to work together with the Scottish Government on vital areas such as tackling the cost of living, growing our economy and leading the international response to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine.

At this time of unprecedented challenges, the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom have never been more apparent. The United Kingdom Government are providing the Scottish Government with a record block grant settlement of £41 billion per year over the next three years, and the people in Scotland are benefiting from unprecedented cost of living support announced by this Prime Minister and our Chancellor. It is important now that we move on from constitutional issues, to focus on tackling our shared challenges. I therefore welcome the Supreme Court's judgment, and I call on the Scottish Government to set aside these divisive constitutional issues so that we can work together, focusing all of our attention and resources on the key issues that matter to the people of Scotland.

The United Kingdom Government are proud of their role as the custodian of the devolution settlement. The United Kingdom is one of the most successful political and economic unions in the world. By promoting and protecting its combined strengths, we are building on

hundreds of years of partnership and shared history. I will conclude by saying that when we work together as one United Kingdom, we are safer, stronger and more prosperous.

Ian Blackford: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

It is right that the UK Government answer questions today, and answer them quickly, because this morning the Supreme Court dealt with a question of law; there is now a massive question of democracy. Some of the Westminster parties are already wildly celebrating this morning's decision, but I think it is safe to say that their thoughtless triumphalism will not last very long, because this judgment raises profound and deeply uncomfortable questions about the basis of the future of the United Kingdom.

The biggest question of all is how the Prime Minister can ever again repeat the myth that the United Kingdom is a voluntary union of nations. In 2014, the Smith Commission made it clear that

"nothing in this report prevents Scotland becoming an independent country in the future should the people of Scotland so choose."

If that is true and if the Secretary of State's Government are still committed to that promise, will he urgently amend the Scotland Act 1998 to ensure that the Scottish people have the right to choose our own future? If he fails to do that, is he deliberately choosing to deny democracy, because a so-called partnership in which one partner is denied the right to choose a different future, or even to ask itself the question, cannot be described in any way as a voluntary partnership, or even a partnership at all?

Today's decision casts focus on the democratic decisions of the Scottish people. Since 2014, the Scottish National party has won eight elections in a row. We have secured multiple mandates. The question is: how many times do people in Scotland have to vote for a referendum before they get it?

The more contempt the Westminster establishment shows for Scottish democracy, the more certain it is that Scotland will vote yes when the choice comes to be made. Scotland did not vote for Brexit. We did not vote for a new age of Tory austerity. We did not vote for this Prime Minister, and we have not voted for the Tories in Scotland since 1955. What we did vote for was the choice of a different future. If Westminster keeps blocking our democratic decisions, lawfully and democratically Scotland will find a way out of this Union.

Mr Jack: This idea that a mandate was delivered in 2021 in the Holyrood elections is completely misleading. As the First Minister herself said very clearly in an interview in *The Herald*—this is when she thought that the former First Minister, the previous SNP leader Alex Salmond, was gaming the system with his party Alba—that parties should stand on both the list and first-past-the-post constituency systems. The Greens did not fulfil that and neither did Alba. Let us be clear: in the 2021 Holyrood elections—the so-called mandate—less than one third of the Scottish electorate voted for the SNP.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Supreme Court for examining this case in detail, for reaching a unanimous decision and for doing so in a speedy manner. I also thank the Scottish Lord Advocate for referring this case to the Supreme Court. She was right not to allow it to be launched in the Scottish Parliament before seeking legal clarity on this matter, and we are all in a better place now for that clarity having been put forward. The Supreme Court's ruling is absolutely clear and concise.

The Leader of the SNP has just accused those who are against independence of "triumphalism". Nothing could be further from the truth. We are deeply disappointed and angry that the politics in Scotland is paralysed by this constitutional grievance. It is now time for all of us in Scottish politics to focus on the problems facing our country, from rocketing bills to the crisis in the NHS, and I wish the SNP had such passion for doing that. I fear that that will not happen after the First Minister announced that she will turn the next general election into a de facto referendum. As an example, the SNP has made such a mess of our NHS that, earlier this week, it was reported that NHS chiefs have been discussing plans to privatise our health service—Labour's and perhaps our country's greatest achievement.

There is not a majority in Scotland for a referendum or for independence, but neither is the majority for the status quo. There is a majority in Scotland, and across the UK, for change. This failing and incapable Tory Government are unfit to govern this country. They have crashed the economy and they are as big a threat to the Union as any nationalist. People in Scotland and across the UK are sick of watching their incompetence, our national standing falling in the world, and working people paying for their decisions, but change is coming. It is coming with a UK Labour Government that will bring economic growth, raise living standards and restore our nation's place in the world.

Does the Secretary of State agree that change is indeed coming and that Scottish voters will lead the way by kicking his Government out of office and helping to elect a UK Labour Government?

Mr Jack: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on his last point.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My constituents will not be celebrating this outcome, but they will be deeply relieved that, with all the other issues that they face, they are not going to be facing a hugely divisive independence referendum next October. In my constituency, people cannot access an NHS dentist. They cannot access a GP. They can hardly get an ambulance to come out, and our local hospital was overwhelmed two weeks ago. On that basis, does my right hon. Friend agree that this is the time to move on and focus on the issues that really matter to our constituents in Scotland?>

Mr Jack: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and I know he has put in a lot of work on this subject in the past. The Scottish Government must focus on the people's priorities. Public services in Scotland are falling behind and failing in many areas and it is important that we now stop the constitutional wrangling and focus on the people's priorities. That is what they want us to do.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Democracy denial is not a good look. We have had repeated non-answers and repeated assertions from those on the Tory Benches today that they somehow know better than the people of Scotland what they want. Now we have an extraordinary suggestion from the Secretary of State that we somehow do not have a mandate. None of those things is correct and none of those things deals with the crux of the issue. This is a fundamental issue of democracy and whether this really is a voluntary Union. Is the Secretary of State going to stand up for democracy or not?

Mr Jack: I do stand up for democracy. As I have said, in the Holyrood elections last year less than one third of Scots voted for the Scottish National party, and current polling shows that less than one third of Scots want another independence referendum.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Now that we have clarity from the Supreme Court, I urge my right hon. Friend to redouble his efforts to work with the Scottish Government and local authorities in Scotland to deliver on the issues that matter to people. My experience of two years in the Scotland Office is that there is an appetite to work together on welfare, where there is shared responsibility, on the city deals and on many other issues. That is what we should be focusing on, not more divisive referendums.

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend is right. It is not just about what is in front of us, but what is behind us. Behind us is the furlough scheme, which supported 900,000 jobs during the pandemic, and the £1.5 billion of Barnett support that the Chancellor announced in his autumn statement; in front of us is not just the growth deals, but freeports and forthcoming cost of living support.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This ruling is bad for the Government, and I do not think they quite see that yet. This ruling confronts the Scottish people with the fact that there is no legal or democratic route to a referendum. All that will do is to infuriate the Scottish people and make sure that they have their demands for Scottish democracy in place. What we have not had is the how. How do we now get to a referendum if the legal and democratic means are closed? The Prime Minister was asked, and the Secretary of State has now been asked, so will he now please answer?

Mr Jack: I will answer very simply. In 2014, there was a consensus between both Governments, all political parties and civic Scotland. Those are not the circumstances today.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I just point out to my right hon. Friend that it was in fact the United Kingdom Parliament that gave Scotland a referendum in 2014—[*Interruption.*] Oh yes! Does he recall that the SNP then said it was a once-in-a-generation decision? Has he ever known a generation to pass so quickly, in just eight years? Could it be that the SNP prefers campaigning for a referendum it cannot have because it wants to distract attention from the failures of the Scottish Government on schools, on health, on procurement of ferries and on many other issues?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend is right, and he only makes points that many of the commentariat in the Scottish media make.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The judgment today puts the point beyond any measure of doubt, and that is to be welcomed. I also welcome the announcement from the Scottish Government that they will respect the judgment of the court, because for Governments to respect the rule of law is very important. We shall hold them to that commitment in the future. Will the Secretary of State assure me that, while demanding respect for the rule of law from others, the Government of which he is part will do the same?

Mr Jack: Yes.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I, too, welcome the unanimous ruling by the Supreme Court and respect that judgment, as other Members have said. As my right hon. Friend has pointed out, current polling and past election results do not show a majority of voters in Scotland favouring independence-supporting parties. Does he agree that there is no evidence that the democratic mandate has changed since 2014?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend is right; the majority of voters in Scotland vote for parties that support the Union.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The United Kingdom Supreme Court has answered a legal question this morning, not a political one. The lesson of history is that a nation's exercise of its right to self-determination can be delayed, but not denied. Can the right hon. Gentleman answer the question that the Prime Minister could not or would not answer: if people living in Scotland continue to elect a majority of pro-independence Members of the Scottish Parliament and MPs who support a second independence referendum, what is the democratic route to realising that mandate?

Mr Jack: As I have pointed out, it is not the case that a majority of the Scottish electorate have voted for independence-supporting parties.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I welcome the clarity of the judgment by the Supreme Court. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the constant political wrangling and doubts over Scotland's constitutional status and the capacity for and prospect of holding a referendum will constantly undermine Scotland's attractiveness to private investors, who would create the jobs, wealth and prosperity that people in Scotland rightly deserve?

Mr Jack: Yes. Having been a businessman before I came into this place, I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is unattractive to investors when there is uncertainty and a cloud hanging over Scotland on this matter. Far better the Scottish Government put it behind them now—the ruling is very clear—and we move forward to building the Scottish economy for the benefit of all the people in Scotland.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): We sit here in this House knowing that Scottish politicians will only ever make up a fraction of the seats. We have a UK Government that the people of Scotland did not vote

for—indeed, a UK Prime Minister that nobody voted for. Bearing all that in mind, may I ask Westminster's man in Scotland to name just one scenario under which he would agree to the people of Scotland being able to determine their own democratic future?

Mr Jack: As I have said in my answers, the route to a referendum is when there is consensus between Governments, across political parties and across civic Scotland, as there was in 2014. That is not the case now: now, the UK Government want to focus on the Scottish economy, on creating freeports, on supporting people with the cost of living and on getting on with the day job, which is what I think the Scottish Government should do.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): As someone of Scottish descent, may I say that there are many of us living in the United Kingdom, across the four separate territories, who have an enormous fondness and love for Scotland? When I have visited Scotland, for example, the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney—I notice, by the way, that the leader of the SNP in Westminster has never visited it himself—Nova Innovation outside Edinburgh or the Rosyth shipyards, it was to support great businesses, based in Scotland, doing exciting things that the United Kingdom can promote abroad for the benefit of us all. Surely that is the most important thing we could all focus on today?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend makes a good point. On his initial remarks, we are a family of nations and a nation of families.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am a bit puzzled. Why do this Government, who do not have a mandate in Scotland, continue to refuse the right of the Scottish people to hold a referendum, as things have changed enormously since 2014?

Mr Jack: Because this Government believe that the Scottish people's priority is to see their two Governments working together in a collaborative and constructive partnership.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The SNP mistakes its obsession with independence for the obsession of the people of Scotland. As we have already heard, that is simply not the case. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, rather than going down the rabbit hole of creating a constitutional crisis, all our constituents, north and south of the border, want us to focus on making our public services work? That is an area in which the SNP conspicuously fails.

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend makes a salient point, and he is absolutely right. The Scottish people want good public services delivered to them by a Scottish Government focused on the things that were devolved to Holyrood.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Tryweryn vote in 1957 taught people in Wales that Welsh MPs can always be overridden by the structural tyranny of the majority here in Westminster. The First Minister of Wales, himself a Unionist, is on record as saying that the UK can be sustained only

“as a voluntary association of four nations, in which we choose to pool our sovereignty for common purposes and for common benefits.”

Given that the Labour Front-Bench team has parroted the same lines as the Tories this afternoon, will the Secretary of State write to the First Minister of Wales to confirm whether we are voluntary partners in this Union or involuntary inmates?

Mr Jack: No, I will not write to the First Minister of Wales. I will leave that to the Secretary of State of Wales or anyone else who feels that it is in their remit. I say to the right hon. Lady that polling shows that less than a third of Scots want another independence referendum.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The smug, patronising and cloth-eared response from the Prime Minister, the so-called Secretary of State for Scotland and Tory Members to the ripping away of democratic human rights from the Scottish people will be seen by many Scots today. Imagine the uproar if the European Parliament and European courts had denied this Parliament the right to legislate on the Brexit referendum. The Secretary of State was unwilling, or simply unable, to answer that question when asked by the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). How does any member country leave this so-called voluntary Union?

Mr Jack: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has read the Supreme Court judgment, but it makes it very clear that the matter is reserved to the Westminster Parliament. On the mandate argument, it is clear that less than a third of the Scottish electorate voted for the SNP last year.

Gavin Newlands: Answer the question!

Mr Jack: We are very clear about that, and we are very clear that a future referendum would take place, as in 2014, when there is consensus between—

Gavin Newlands: Answer the question!

Mr Jack: I am answering it. When there is consensus between both Governments, all political parties and civic Scotland.

Gavin Newlands: Answer the question!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot just sit there yelling. It is a really bad look. I call Amy Callaghan.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I will ask the Secretary of State the same question that I asked the Prime Minister just a short while ago, to which I am still waiting for an answer. What is the route for a nation to leave this so-called voluntary Union? He has answered three times now referring to a majority of votes, so would the Government respect the result of a general election as a de facto referendum?

Mr Jack: General elections are when people expect parties to come forward with manifestos on the issues that Scotland and the United Kingdom face. That is what general elections are for.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): A former Member of Parliament for Cork City once said:

“No man has the right to fix a boundary to the march of a nation. No man has the right to say to his country, ‘Thus far shalt thou go and no further’.”

Of course, this Parliament no longer has a Member for Cork City, because Charles Stewart Parnell was right. This United Kingdom is clearly not a partnership of equals—that has been made absolutely clear today—so when will the Government publish clear criteria for how the people of the north of Ireland can leave it?

Mr Jack: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman ask that question at Northern Ireland questions.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State confirm that his view is that this is a voluntary Union? If so, by what mechanism can the Scottish people, in the future, have their choice about whether to remain within it?

Mr Jack: I feel that I have answered that question many times already, so I will refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Things have changed dramatically since 2014. I remind the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), that in 2019 he said:

“a democracy fails to be a democracy if the public are not allowed to change their mind.”—[*Official Report*, 8 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 124.]

Back in 2012, Alistair Darling said:

“Today we are equal partners in the United Kingdom.”

Today, our First Minister noted that this ruling confirms that the notion of the UK as a voluntary partnership is no longer—if it ever was—a reality. Why will the Secretary of State not acknowledge that the only way for Scotland to be treated as an equal is with its independence?

Mr Jack: I have made my position very clear. I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Our Secretary of State for Scotland, who can go to the unelected House of Lords at a time of his choosing, is setting democratic tests on how Scotland can choose its own future. It is fanciful and absurd. If he is so confident in his view of what the Scottish people's priorities are, why does he not call our bluff by calling a referendum?

Mr Jack: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we had a referendum in 2014, and we know what the agreement on that was between the Governments, political parties and civic Scotland. We feel now that the priorities for Scotland are for us all to pull together, work to bring back the economy after covid, tackle the cost of living crisis, and get in front of the issues that we believe are the priorities for the people of Scotland.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The legal position is now clear, but the political decision that needs to be made must also be clear. Under no circumstances should the power to hold referendums be devolved—be it to Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales—because we know that nationalism-obsessed politicians will use that power

[Sammy Wilson]

to call continual referendums until they get the result they want, to distort political debate, and to cover up their own governmental incompetence. I plead with the Government not to even contemplate going down that road. However, they also need to do far more, whether in the Northern Ireland, Welsh or Scottish context, to sell the benefits of the Union, which are apparent to everybody.

Mr Jack: I agree that the benefits are apparent to everybody. The right hon. Gentleman makes good points. The Supreme Court looked at and opined on the Scotland Act 1998, and today agreed that this matter is reserved to the Westminster Parliament.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I will give the Secretary of State the opportunity to say something interesting. If this Union is genuinely based on consent, how can the people of Scotland demonstrate that they have withdrawn that consent?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman will be disappointed with my answer, which is that I refer him to the remarks I made earlier.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In 2014, the people of Glasgow voted for independence, and I am sure that if the question were put before them again, they would do so again. But we are not in 2014. Does the Secretary of State accept that democracy did not exist only on 18 September 2014? Democracy is a living thing. Does he accept that the people have the right to change their mind?

Mr Jack: The people of Glasgow did vote for independence in 2014, as did three other local authorities in Scotland. However, the other 28 out of 32 voted to remain in the United Kingdom.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This important ruling settles the question for now—certainly on the legal matter. Does the Secretary of State think that it gives us ample time to investigate what else the Scottish Government are doing? The debate about the referendum has thrown up a lot of sand, but the Scottish Government are underachieving in so many areas of public service, and that needs to be shown.

Mr Jack: The hon. Lady speaks for many people in Scotland who fear the same thing—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The more people yell out, the further down the order they will go. I call Alan Brown.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We are supposed to be living in a parliamentary democracy. As such, last year the SNP won 62 out of 73 constituency seats—85% of the seats. That is equivalent to a party here winning 552 seats. There is a pro-independence majority in Holyrood, and in the last four elections, a majority of voters voted for parties that support independence and having a referendum. If the Secretary of State is going to ignore a parliamentary democracy

and parliamentary votes of the people, what is the route for the people of Scotland to have a referendum and have their say?

Mr Jack: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A union, like a marriage, should be based upon equality and consent. It is clear when a marriage has run its course how a partner can extricate themselves from it, but we are yet to find out from the Secretary of State how we can extricate ourselves from this Union.

Mr Jack: I believe what we have is a collaborative and constructive partnership, and I think history shows that. I have been very clear: the answer is when there is consensus between the two Governments, across all political parties and civic Scotland. Let us be honest, polling shows that less than a third of Scots want another referendum and, as I said earlier and repeat again, less than a third of the Scottish electorate voted for the Scottish National party last year. When we face all those things and look at people's priorities in polling, independence is right down the rankings. It is not what they go to bed at night worrying about. They worry about the health system, the education system, crime, drug deaths and whether or not they can get a ferry to their island. That is what they worry about.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Given how many Prime Ministers previously defended the Union, I am surprised there are so few Unionists here to defend it today. I want to quote John Major, who said that "no nation could be held irrevocably in a Union against its will." Does the future Baron agree with that statement?

Mr Jack: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the remarks I made earlier. Polling shows the Scottish people do not want another referendum. There is not massive dissatisfaction with the Union. It is very low on the Scottish people's list of priorities. What they want is our two Governments to start working together to deliver their priorities. That is what they want us to do.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, we have been meeting our parallel scrutiny committees in the devolved legislatures. Some 20 years on, it is clear that devolution, parliamentary scrutiny functions and the inter-Union functions are not working and need improving. Our Union was forced and often violently formed, but it has for centuries successfully built, through consent and citizen recognition that unity is strength. The hallmark of this Government is ignorance of our history, disrespect for those institutions across the devolution settlement and a failure to engage across all Departments with the committees and bodies that have been formed to enhance the political Union. What the Secretary of State needs to take from this ruling is a need to force the Government to treat those institutions with the respect they deserve to keep our Union.

Mr Jack: We put in place the intergovernmental relations recommendations from the Dunlop review. Those were put in place.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The Secretary of State has referenced a number of times the suggestion that only a third of the electorate in Scotland voted for the SNP at the last Scottish election. In that same election, the Conservatives secured less than 15% of the electorate voting for them, so we need a bit of context. This all comes down to a basic question: if not through the route of a referendum through the Scottish Parliament, what is the democratic route for Scotland to determine our own future? Countless Members have asked. Where is the answer?

Mr Jack: First, there were also many other votes cast for other Unionist parties. It is a matter of consensus between the two Governments, political parties and civic Scotland—the answer I gave earlier.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The Supreme Court today did not rule that Scotland should not be independent or that Scotland should not be able to have a referendum; it ruled that the existing legislation written by Unionist politicians does not allow the Scottish Government to make that decision, unless the UK Government are willing to amend it, as they did in 2014. That is the legal argument.

I want to know what the democratic argument is against Scotland being able to do that. In the Scottish Parliament elections—one of the eight elections we have won since 2014—not only did the SNP leaflets say, “Vote SNP for a referendum on independence”, but the Tory leaflets, the Labour leaflets and the Liberal Democrat leaflets all said it. What is the democratic argument against Scotland and the people of Scotland being able to simply answer that question?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important, if we are to get everybody in, that the questions are short.

Mr Jack: It is important we get everyone in and they have their say. I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier: less than a third of the Scottish electorate voted for the Scottish National party. It is entirely a matter of consensus, and at the moment we believe that the priorities should be elsewhere. The cost of living, supporting people through inflation, the energy price cap, getting on and delivering freeports, delivering on the growth deals—those are the things that we think the people of Scotland expect us to do.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Supreme Court ruling today. I have sat patiently and listened to SNP Members, one after another, reflect what could fairly be said to be the concerns of their political party. Unfortunately, they do not reflect the concerns I get in my mailbox every day from constituents across Edinburgh West, who are concerned about the cost of living, energy prices, the state of the NHS in Scotland and the teacher strikes we are about to face. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time they stopped this self-indulgent obsession and addressed the real issues that concern the people of Scotland?

Mr Jack: Yes, I could not agree with the hon. Lady more.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I agree with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who was clear that this is a legal position by the Supreme Court that I think the entire Chamber welcomes. It is a legal opinion requested by the Scottish Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who is no longer in their place, mentioned a Prime Minister. Does the Secretary of State agree with the former Baroness Thatcher, who said that “as a nation”, Scots

“have an undoubted right to national self-determination”?

The question to Westminster’s man in Scotland is this: does he agree with the former British Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher, about Scotland’s right to national self-determination, and if he does not, what is he doing in the Scotland Office?

Mr Jack: As I have said, less than a third of Scots want another independence referendum. Less than a third of the Scottish electorate voted for the Scottish National party. We just do not recognise this mandate.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): All the leaflets from the right hon. Gentleman’s party at the last eight elections have said, “Vote Tory to stop an independence referendum”. I am confused, because he says today that the question was settled in 2014. Why, then, did he put out leaflets telling people to vote against a referendum? Clearly, despite being asked a number of times, the Secretary of State is unable to tell this House and the people of Scotland the democratic route out of this Union. He is unable to do it. Is that why he is scurrying off to the House of Lords, because he cannot face his constituents at the next election? Does he not realise that the people of Scotland are sovereign, and they are watching?

Mr Jack: To pick up on the hon. Lady’s middle point, which was the only relevant point she made, the reason why leaflets in general elections say no to a second independence referendum is simply because the Scottish National party is obsessed with an independence referendum and nothing else.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): In 2014, people in Scotland were told that if they voted yes the value of pensions would collapse, supermarkets would be empty of food and energy prices would rocket, and that if they voted no, freedom of movement would be guaranteed, the UK would have as close to federalism as possible and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) would never become Prime Minister. Did the people of Scotland get what they voted for in 2014?

Mr Jack: On the basis that none of the apocalypse happened and that in 2014 the Scottish National party was asking the people of Scotland to vote to leave the European Union, then yes, they got what they voted for.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): As of 10 am today, we no longer have a Union of equals. This Union has ceased to be; it is bereft of life; it is a dead Union. When will the UK Government respect the people of Scotland and their right to choose? Now is not the time to deny them.

Mr Jack: Okay, so we have resorted to quoting Monty Python, which does not surprise me. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that in order for there to be democracy, there needs to be cross-party support, and that there needs to cross-support in order for us to have an independence referendum, but there was not cross-party support for a Brexit referendum, austerity or the demonisation of immigrants. Why does the Conservative party get to be the arbiter of what does and does not require democratic support?

Mr Jack: As the hon. Lady knows, and as I have made very clear, we believe that the priority of people in Scotland is for the two Governments to work constructively and collaboratively together, in partnership.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On 18 September 2014, the people of Inverclyde voted to remain in the Union by 86 votes. A few short months later, they returned me as the SNP MP on an independence manifesto; they had changed their mind. They returned me in 2017 and 2019—if the Government want to go again I will go again. But what is the route for the people of Inverclyde to express their views now in a referendum?

Mr Jack: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The judges have quite clearly rejected the Scottish Government's argument that they can hold a second referendum. Legal authority lies with the UK here, in this place. There have been clear attempts to manipulate devolution. With the rise in the cost of living and the increasing evils of the Putin regime, does the Minister agree that what is needed now is a campaign and a strategy to illustrate the advantages of the Union, showing that we are stronger together? We must focus on strengthening the Union, our economy and our joint prosperity.

Mr Jack: Yes. I made those points in my opening remarks and I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): From the Scottish child payment to free prescriptions, to not really supporting the war in Iraq to free period products, Scotland has consistently chosen a different path from Westminster. I am reminded today of the words of the late Bashir Ahmad MSP, who said that

“it isn't important where you come from, what matters is where we are going together as a nation”.

Many Scots like me support independence on the principle that decisions for Scotland should be made in Scotland, by the people of Scotland. Will the Secretary of State for Scotland clarify whether Scotland has the democratic right to choose her own path if she continues to vote for a majority of independence-supporting MSPs up at Holyrood and independence-supporting MPs here at Westminster?

Mr Jack: I have answered the second part of the hon. Lady's question a number of times already. In answer to the first part of her question, about the various policies she outlined, that is why we respect and strengthen devolution at every opportunity, whereas the Scottish National party wants to destroy devolution.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): This is nothing short of parody. I have been an MP here for nearly three years and I have never heard a Minister say “I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave some moments ago” as many times as this. That is because the so-called Secretary of State for Scotland has his back against the wall because he is denying democracy and democratic norms. He and all the other Tories say that we cannot have another referendum because we do not want to foment the division that exists around the constitutional space in Scotland—well, it exists already, so let us lance the boil. Let us have a referendum and find out what the people of Scotland want.

Mr Jack: To pick up on the hon. Gentleman's first point, the reason I say that I have answered the question so many times before is that hon. Members are asking the same question time and again—it is just a little bit repetitive. The answer is quite simple. As I have explained many times before, the route to a referendum in 2014 involved consensus between both Governments, across all the political parties and across civic Scotland. We are far from being in that place now.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The decisions taken in Westminster dictate the impact of issues such as the costing of living crisis on my constituents and all the people of Scotland. They deserve to have their voices heard, and we can all agree that the landscape has changed since 2014. How will the UK Government work with the Scottish Government to allow the Scottish people to choose whether they wish to remain part of the Union or to be an independent country?

Mr Jack: We want to work with the Scottish Government to show the people of Scotland the benefits of being part of the Union and to show that we can work together on delivering on growth deals, freeports and the cost of living crisis, and on delivering the £1.5 billion of extra funding that is coming as a result of the Chancellor's statement last week. We want to show the people of Scotland the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom. Looking at the numbers, there seems to be an in-built majority for Unionist parties, so I think the people of Scotland recognise that.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Secretary of State has been struggling to answer the most basic questions from colleagues, so I have a simple question for him. On 13 November 2017, in a debate in Westminster Hall, I asked him if he agreed with the preposterous suggestion of Michael Kelly, the former Lord Provost of Glasgow, that Scotland should not have another independence referendum until every person who voted in the 2014 referendum was dead. In reply, the Secretary of State said that

“if I had my way, we would wait even longer.”—[*Official Report*, 13 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 24WH.]

Is that still his position today?

Mr Jack: I will give the same answer that I have always given, which is that we believe a referendum is not the priority for the people of Scotland. We believe Scotland is stronger in the United Kingdom and benefits enormously from the United Kingdom, and that the rest of the United Kingdom benefits enormously from

having Scotland in it. From renewables and oil and gas to cultural matters and many other things, Scotland is a very valued member of the United Kingdom, and that remains my position.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Secretary of State keeps patronising us about what the priorities of the people of Scotland are. The fact is that the people of Scotland keep voting for the SNP and for an independence referendum as the means to deliver on their priorities. The non-answer that he keeps referring us to is some vague nonsense about reaching consensus. In 2014 we reached consensus precisely because there was pro-independence majority in the Scottish Parliament. Why is that not good enough now? He can dissemble and he can dodge this afternoon, but he cannot do that for the weeks ahead.

Mr Jack: As I have said on many occasions, there is not any clear evidence that a majority of Scots are voting for the SNP—quite the contrary. Less than a third of Scots are voting for the SNP. It is very clear in all polling that less than a third of Scots want a referendum any time soon.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The Supreme Court has really done us all a favour by answering one legal question but leaving us with a far bigger democratic one. But let us have some facts: 73% of Scots want back into the European Union; 50% plus of Scots want an independent Scotland in the European Union; and 22% of Scots trust the UK Government to act in their interests. Does the Secretary of State accept my point that his blinkered defence of the indefensible democratic deficit will be the UK's undoing?

Mr Jack: As I have said on many occasions, the United Kingdom Government believe that Scotland, in the United Kingdom, brings many benefits and that we, as a United Kingdom, are stronger together. We believe that the majority of Scots see that too.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): If the Secretary of State is so convinced that there is a substantial anti-independence majority among today's people of Scotland,

will he agree to publish in its entirety all the polling done at our expense by the Scotland Office? If not, can we assume that the reason the Government are desperate to avoid a referendum is that even their private polling tells them that, this time, the result will be a massive yes?

Mr Jack: The Scotland Office has done no private polling. The polling that I referred to is the public opinion polling that we can all read.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Scotland joining the Union predates the Scotland Act 1998 and it was the 1998 Act that the Supreme Court judged on today. The 1998 Act will not and cannot stop Scotland being an independent country. I am sure that the Secretary of State believes in the right of independence for Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia and many others, so does he believe the same for Scotland? If Scotland votes for independence at an election ballot box, will he respect the democracy of that event?

Mr Jack: As I keep pointing out to SNP Members, less than a third of Scots voted for the SNP at the ballot box.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): In 2018, this House voted to acknowledge the claim of right that Scotland's people have the right to choose their own destiny. Does the Secretary of State now deny that decision of Parliament?

Mr Jack: The claim of right? We had a Union of the Crowns in 1603 and a Union of the Parliaments in 1707, but they were all a terribly long time ago. We firmly believe that we have a strong partnership that has endured for more than 300 years and has delivered for all parts of the United Kingdom, and that we are better together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State.

Hotel Asylum Accommodation: Local Authority Consultation

1.31 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on consultation with local authorities as to the selection of hotels for contingency asylum accommodation.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): On my appointment by the Prime Minister three weeks ago, I was appraised of the critical situation at the Manston processing centre. Within days, the situation escalated further with a terrorist attack at Western Jet Foil that forced the transfer of hundreds of additional migrants to Manston. I urgently visited Western Jet Foil and Manston within days of my appointment to assess the situation for myself and to speak with frontline staff, during which time it became clear to me that very urgent action was required.

Since then, the numbers at Manston have fallen from more than 4,000 to zero today. That would not have been possible without the work of dedicated officials across the Home Office—from the officials in cutters saving lives at sea, to the medical staff at Manston—and I put on record my sincere gratitude to them for the intense effort required to achieve that result.

To bring Manston to a sustainable footing and meet our legal and statutory duties to asylum seekers who would otherwise have been left destitute, we have had to procure additional contingency accommodation at extreme pace. In some instances, however, that has led to the Home Office and our providers failing to properly engage with local authorities and Members of Parliament. I have been clear that that is completely unacceptable and that it must change.

On Monday, a “Dear colleague” letter in my name was sent to outline a new set of minimum requirements for that engagement, backed by additional resources. This includes an email notification to local authorities and Members of Parliament no less than 24 hours prior to arrivals; a fulsome briefing on the relevant cohort, required support and dedicated point of contact; and an offer of a meeting with the local authority as soon as possible prior to arrival.

I have since met chief executives and leaders of local authorities across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, among many other meetings, to improve our engagement. We discussed their concerns and outlined the changes that we intend to make together. I have also met our providers to convey my concerns and those conveyed to me by hon. Members on both sides of the House in recent weeks, and to agree new standards of engagement and conduct from them.

These new standards will lead to a modest improvement, but I am clear that much more needs to be done, so this performance standard will be reviewed weekly with a view to improving service levels progressively as quickly as we can. In the medium term, we are committed to moving to a full dispersal accommodation model, which would be fairer and cheaper. We continue to pursue larger accommodation sites that are decent but not luxurious, because we want to make sure that those in our care are supported appropriately but that the UK is

a less attractive destination for asylum shoppers and economic migrants. That is exactly what the Home Secretary and I intend to achieve.

Giles Watling: I thank the Minister for his answer. Last Sunday afternoon, the Home Office contacted my local authority by email to give it 24 hours’ notice that it had selected a hotel to act as contingency asylum accommodation. That gave the excellent people at Tendring District Council no time to respond properly to the issue of services. It is an inadequate timeframe and shows how poor the comms from the Home Office have been; I have not been contacted personally about the issue at all. I am glad that the Minister finds it unacceptable, but will he agree to meet me and the local authority to discuss the plans for Clacton?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those important issues. I will, of course, be happy to meet him, as I have met hon. Members on both sides of the House in almost every case where someone has requested to do so.

In respect of the hotel in Tendring, as I understand it, having spoken to officials this morning, a proposition was put to Tendring District Council to use a former care home in my hon. Friend’s constituency, which would have accommodated a small number of asylum seekers. Short notice was given because it was to be a backstop accommodation option in the light of the extreme situation that we were contending with at Manston. On further inquiries, and prior to his inquiry to the Department and the calling of the urgent question, the proposition was dropped by the Home Office and there is no intention of proceeding with it.

For information, had that proposition been taken forward, it would have been for a very small number of individuals. At the moment, there are 39 asylum seekers accommodated in my hon. Friend’s constituency, 14 of whom are in hotels and 25 in dispersed accommodation. That accounts for 0.02% of the population of Tendring’s local authority. I do not say that to diminish the legitimate concerns that he raises, but merely to provide context. If we are dealing with 40,000 individuals crossing the channel illegally, there will be a need for all local authorities in the country to work with the Home Office and to play their part. It is absolutely incumbent on the Home Office in return, however, to provide good standards of engagement so that we can ensure that the right accommodation is chosen in the right places. That is exactly what I intend to achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It seems that we come to the Chamber at least once a week to hear about the mess that the Home Secretary is making of an asylum system that her Government have broken. The root cause of today’s urgent question is the failure of the Government to process asylum claims with anything like the efficiency required. In 2012, the Home Office was making 14 asylum decisions a month; it is now making just five.

Tory Ministers like to blame covid, but the truth is that this is a mess of their own making. They chose to downgrade asylum decision makers from higher executive

officer grade to lower executive officer grade, leading to a less experienced workforce on lower wages with lower retention rates and collapsing morale. The inevitable consequences were slower decisions, more decisions overturned at appeal, an increasing backlog and ballooning taxpayer costs.

With the average time to process an asylum claim standing at 449 days, the people smugglers see the backlog as a marketing opportunity—an open invite from this Conservative Government to those who want to melt away into the underground economy. All this catastrophic incompetence has led to the Minister scrambling around to find contingency hotel accommodation, resulting in what the Home Secretary described this morning as “poor communication” between central and local government.

Will the Minister therefore confirm whether he really feels that his undertaking to give local authorities as little as 24 hours’ notice is reasonable? Did he recently pull out of two meetings with council leaders at short notice? What mechanisms is he using to monitor the performance of contractors and subcontractors? I have heard from councils where the public health team was not informed about serious health issues, including pregnancies, so does he accept that he is failing to give local authorities key health-related information? What progress is he making on tackling the crisis of unaccompanied children being placed in hotels—222 have already gone missing—and will he apologise to the couples who have had to cancel their wedding receptions in hotels at extremely short notice as a result of this Government’s chronic mismanagement?

Robert Jenrick: Dear me! The reason I had to pull out of the meeting with local authority leaders was that the hon. Gentleman had called an urgent question and I was here answering his questions. The idea that the Labour party knows how to get a grip of this challenge is, frankly, laughable. The last Labour Government left the Home Office in such disarray that their own Home Secretary declared it not fit for purpose and had to split the place up. The backlog of cases was so high that he had to institute an amnesty, where they literally wrote to people and said, “Welcome to Britain. We can’t process your application—you’re in.” That is not the approach that we are taking.

Labour Members have no credible proposals to stop the problem at source. They voted against the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and they opposed the Rwanda scheme. Their own leader, in his leadership campaign, called for the closure of immigration removal centres—the places where we detain people, often foreign national offenders, while we are trying to get them out of the country. The truth is that, in the last Labour Government, the party was committed to mass migration and uncontrolled immigration. We are only the party that believes in the British public. We are the party that wants to ensure that we secure our borders and have a controlled migration system.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As always, I have some sympathy for my right hon. Friend in having to deal with an urgent question such as this. Recent examples in Torbay show that previously there was engagement with local authorities, although I must say that the news that we were looking to use accommodation was never welcomed. It would be interesting for him to reflect on

how the new standards he has laid out will operate and work. Is he saying that this will be an interim period with a bare minimum of 24 hours’ notice and that he hopes to go back to giving a longer period of notice, both to MPs and to councils, particularly those with responsibility for children’s services, because it is really unacceptable that people are finding out about this from staff working at hotels and residents living next door?

Robert Jenrick: I can only speak to the situation as I found it when I arrived in the Department, and at that point there were almost 4,000 people at the Manston site. There were serious concerns about conditions at the site and, indeed, about its legality, and there was insufficient accommodation available to us to house the asylum seekers. We have set out, through immense efforts in the last few weeks, to rectify that situation. It is clear to me that insufficient accommodation was procured over a sustained period, and we need to tackle that. We will do it in a number of different ways, including through dispersal accommodation with local authorities; through judicious use of hotels, with good engagement with local authorities; by using larger sites that provide us with decent but not luxurious accommodation; and, of course, by tackling the problem at source. We cannot build our way out of this challenge. We have to reduce the pull factors to the UK and we have to ensure that the backlog of cases is cleared as swiftly as possible.

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

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I think we are all agreed in this House that it is important that the Home Office liaises in advance with local authorities, service providers, non-governmental organisations and local representatives. The Minister has made some commitments in that regard today, and we will obviously monitor closely how those are implemented and how they work. We should also be agreed, and I think we are close to being agreed, that hotels really should be a matter of last resort, rather than routine, so I have a couple of thoughts on how we get there.

First, on where the Home Office spends resources, I hate to say it—well, I do not mind saying it—but the £140 million spent on Rwanda is a complete waste of money. Could the Minister confirm that about 4,000 or 5,000 caseworkers could have been employed for that sort of sum? Let us not waste any more money on that at all. Will he also look at the tens of millions of pounds that contractors are now raking in in profit through that scheme, and seek to provide that money directly to local authorities to procure accommodation in their communities?

Secondly, on the backlog, as I have said before, there are thousands—tens of thousands—of Afghans and Syrians in the system who could be taken out of it with a quick decision. The inadmissibility procedure is a complete waste of time. It achieves nothing, and it clogs up 10,000 spaces.

Finally, we did hear confirmation today that decision makers are among the lowest-paid civil servants going, but they make life and death decisions. Surely that has to be looked at again, and they need to be paid properly.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for a number of valid concerns and suggestions that I will certainly bear in mind. It is important now that the Home Office tackles the quite serious operational issues it faces, one of which is obviously addressing the backlog of cases. We are going to do that by training the staff better, ensuring that they have the right leadership and ensuring that they can raise productivity by having a less bureaucratic system than the one we have today.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to disperse people throughout the United Kingdom in a fair and equitable manner. One of the challenges we face is the fact that, disproportionately, Scotland has not stepped up to this challenge. There are, I believe, only about 10 hotels in Scotland that are currently housing asylum seekers, for example, and the Scottish Government have not supported us in procuring others. Asylum seekers are primarily centred on the city of Glasgow, which has a very significant number of asylum seekers and a long history of accommodating them, but other cities and towns in Scotland need to do the same. If he would like to work with me to correct that imbalance, I would be delighted to do so.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Minister should know that we do not want 24 hours' notice of another hotel going; we want our hotels back to their proper purpose. When is he bringing legislation through this House as a matter of urgency to give him the legal back-up he is going to need so that fair and quick judgments on asylum are upheld, not overturned by the courts?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are reviewing the legal situation, and we will come to a view about whether further changes are needed to make sure that our laws are sufficiently robust. My right hon. Friend and I are in agreement that individuals should come to this country only if they are genuine asylum seekers fleeing persecution, war or human rights abuses, not asylum shoppers who have passed through multiple safe countries, including France, and certainly not if they come from demonstrably safe countries in the first place, such as Albania. We should pursue all options, including Rwanda, to create the right amount of deterrence to deter people from making the crossing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the fact that Manston is empty today, but can I say to the Minister that it should never have got into the mess that it did, because the Home Office was working on forecasts of up to 60,000 people travelling across the channel this year? The Home Affairs Committee produced a report in the summer, and our No. 1 recommendation was to deal with the backlog to stop people having to go into hotels.

Can I highlight to the Minister that Home Office contractors that seek accommodation for asylum seekers are really only interested in the bottom line? They have concentrated the accommodation they have sourced in the poorer, cheaper areas—places such as my own constituency in Hull—and even when local councils in Yorkshire have come together to try to ensure equitable distribution across Yorkshire, Mears, which provides

the accommodation for the Home Office, actually overrules local councils and does not do a service to the Home Office. Will the Minister look at the role that his contractors are playing in the inequitable nature of the distribution of asylum seekers?

Robert Jenrick: I met the contractors and outsource partners of the Home Office earlier in the week, and I conveyed the frustrations that many Members have expressed to me, including some of the points that the right hon. Lady has set out. She is right that, for as long as we have this issue, we need a fairer and more equitable distribution of those accommodated in contingency accommodation. There is clearly a role for the Home Office in leading that. There is also a role for the outsource partners, and I made that point to them. It does seem to me as if some parts of the country are bearing a disproportionate burden, and we need to encourage those outsource partners to look more broadly for suitable accommodation. They undertook to do that, and my officials are going to provide better data to them so that there is a better picture of where the hotels and other accommodation are when they form those judgments.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his engagement with a number of us over the last few weeks and for the work he is doing having come into the job only a few weeks ago. He has outlined his ambition for large dispersal accommodation and, as he knows from his previous roles, local authorities know their communities better than any third-party procurement company. Will he ensure that local authorities have the final say about the appropriateness and suitability of dispersal accommodation, as they will have to manage it on the ground?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have met and spoken to her on a number of occasions as she has voiced the serious concerns of her residents as well as those of Medway Council about at least one potential accommodation site in her constituency. She felt strongly that it was unsuitable, and there were serious concerns with it when I looked into it. We want to get to a point where there is proper, long-term interaction between the Home Office, our outsource partners and local authorities so that these choices are made together on sensible criteria and not imposed on local communities at short notice. The situation at Manston a few weeks ago was so serious, and concerns about its legality so severe, that it was right that we acted swiftly. There may be occasions like that in the future, but that cannot be the sensible, business-as-usual approach of the Home Office.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Sheffield welcomes asylum seekers, and we have 1,500 in the city. I have had a note today from the council leader, which echoes the points made by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). Asylum seekers are almost totally housed in the poorest, most disadvantaged parts of the city, with the reason being that the Home Office's sole criterion is how cheaply it can house them. Council leader, Terry Fox, says that the council has

“offered to work with the Home Office regarding opening up areas of the city which are traditionally not used for procurement”. The Home Office has not even replied to the offer. Will the Minister turn his words into deeds and have his officials get back to the city council today and work with it as requested?

Robert Jenrick: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman—he and I have worked together on local government matters for many years—and I will certainly ask my officials to speak to the city council and see if we can resolve that issue. It is true that, in some areas—even within a particular local authority—the local authority itself creates red lines as to where it wants to have contingency accommodation by saying that there are postcodes where they do not want to see such hotels. That may not be the case in Sheffield, but it is in other areas. The outsource partners raised that with me earlier in the week. We may be able to work together on that to ensure a better distribution, even within local authority areas.

It is, of course, important that we take into account value for money for the taxpayer when we choose hotels. I think it is outrageous that the taxpayer is paying £6 million a day for these hotels. I could not have been clearer to my officials or the outsource partners that I do not want to see the four-star hotels, the stately homes, the luxury barn conversions and the many outrageous examples brought to my attention in the last few weeks persist.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We do have a lot of business to get through this afternoon, so, if we could have quick questions and quick answers, that would be very helpful.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I believe that the situation is now so bad and chaotic that the Minister should consider his position.

On Friday, North Northampton Council, Northants police and other local agencies had an online meeting with the Home Office and Serco regarding the potential use of the 51-bed Royal hotel in Kettering, slap bang in the middle of the town centre. Serious environmental health issues, including mould and no kitchen facilities, were raised. Northants police raised serious concerns about community safety and the vulnerability of the asylum seekers. The Home Office and Serco officials agreed that the hotel would not be used until those issues were properly addressed. Yesterday, the council was advised that 41 asylum seekers had been moved into the hotel on Sunday afternoon, without any notification at all, and that could rise to 80. No biometric of previous offending history data has been shared with the local police. It is totally, 100% unacceptable.

On 27 October, I asked the Minister face to face for a meeting. I asked him again on the Floor of the House last Wednesday. No such meeting has been forthcoming. This is a wrong-headed decision. The local police, the local council and I have been misled, and I have no confidence at all that the Home Office, Serco or the Minister have the first clue what they are doing in relation to asylum seeker relocation.

Robert Jenrick: I will be happy to make some inquiries and come back to my hon. Friend.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): First, given that many asylum seekers in this country are living in fear of far-right reprisals, actual thuggery, bricks through windows and being followed to their accommodation by extremists who would threaten them, will the Minister rebuke the small number of his colleagues who have been naming and identifying hotels where asylum seekers are staying? Secondly, if he wants to reduce the number of hotels and other inappropriate accommodation being used to house asylum seekers, he could do his job properly and clear the backlog. Perhaps he could start with the 35% of asylum seekers coming from those five countries where the grant rate is up to 95% and get rid of the problem. Finally, he is bothered about the cost to the system, and so am I, so why will he not allow asylum seekers to work so that they can pay some of their own costs and integrate better? That would also tackle the awful mental health problems suffered by people who are forced to be idle having fled persecution.

Robert Jenrick: On asylum seekers working, there are respectable arguments on both sides of the issue. I take the view that, for a range of different reasons, there are already significant pull factors to the UK and it would be unwise of us to add a further pull factor. However, I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman takes a different view.

With regard to the backlog, we are now going to institute the processes piloted at our Leeds office, which will ensure that productivity is increased significantly. However, he is right that we need to get through the backlog. It should never have been allowed to get to this level in the first place.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Added to the chaos, we now see a bidding war where local authorities find themselves competing against Home Office procurement for temporary accommodation. That is not new. The Public Accounts Committee highlighted those very issues in its report in November 2020 and made a recommendation to the Home Office, which the Government accepted, that:

“The Department should, as a matter of urgency, communicate with NHS bodies, MPs and other key stakeholders such as police, setting out how it will consult and engage with them in future.”

We also asked the Department to write to us further about that approach. So this failure was on the desk—everybody knew that it was happening—and it is still a failure now. Why?

Robert Jenrick: As I have said in answer to other questions, we want to move forward to a much better level of engagement with local authorities. From my prior experience in local government and seeing the confluence of issues from Homes for Ukraine, the Afghan resettlement scheme, the Syrian scheme, the number of asylum seekers and the general lack of social housing, it is important that Departments such as mine and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities work closely together and that the Government take a place-based approach where we understand the specific pressures that we are placing on particular local authorities and work with them as closely as we can.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A significant number of hotels in my constituency are to be used to house migrants for way more than a year beyond the Manston

[Henry Smith]

incident of a few weeks ago—one is booked out until July 2024—which is starting to cause community tensions and having an impact on the business community, which cannot use those hotels. When will the Minister's dysfunctional Department get a grip and deal with the core problem that the Government have caused?

Robert Jenrick: It is not the Government who have caused the issue here. The primary focus of our attention should be on the tens of thousands of people who are crossing the channel illegally, putting immense pressure on our asylum system. Frankly, even the most well-oiled machine would have found it extremely difficult to deal with that. There are a number of serious issues that the Home Office must get right. Quite clearly, we have to get the backlog of cases down, we have to get people out of hotels, and we have to find sensible accommodation that is good value for money but decent, so that people awaiting the outcome of their cases can be accommodated appropriately.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is right about one thing: the Home Office has not covered itself in glory. In January, I was informed 24 hours earlier that 150 asylum seekers would be relocated to a hotel in Knowsley. Unfortunately, the Home Office notified the wrong local authority about what was about to happen—although, to be fair, it did apologise. There are now 180 asylum seekers in that hotel. I was told that it was initially only going to be for three months. It is now over 10 months. Can the Minister give me some indication of when that arrangement will end? It has already massively exceeded the prediction of how long it would be.

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to get back to the right hon. Gentleman and set out in detail the strategy for hotels and accommodation in his constituency. My approach has been: first, to ensure that Manston is brought to a legal and decent situation as quickly as possible—I think we are broadly there—secondly, to move to good-quality engagement with local authorities while we are still in a difficult and challenging situation; and thirdly, to move to a point where we are not relying on hotels at all, or doing so very judiciously, but accommodating people in dispersal accommodation or larger sensible sites. I am afraid that will take us some time because, as I have said in previous answers, there has been a failure to plan for accommodation over a sustained period. We need to correct that now.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his engagement with Kent councils and for meeting my residents in Dover to hear about the impact of this issue. My council does not get 24 hours' notice before the people it has to deal with arrive. I am very concerned that a second under-18s centre has been established in Dover at a location that the authorities think is not suitable for that purpose, together with Clearsprings making offers of unsuitable hotel accommodation. In what way will that now change, following my right hon. Friend's meeting with Clearsprings, Mears and Serco? Can he give assurances that he will continue to engage with them to ensure that they do

more to assess whether accommodation is suitable and whether services can be provided to support that accommodation?

Robert Jenrick: I have asked all our providers to noticeably step up the engagement they have with Members of Parliament and local authorities, including ensuring—this may be small, but none the less local authorities have raised it with me—that there is a named point of contact for every building, so that a local authority or a Member of Parliament can speak to somebody at that outsourced partner and get answers to their questions and concerns. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her kind words. We are working closely together because she is very much on the frontline of this challenge, and I appreciate just how difficult it is for her constituents. With regard to children's accommodation, we want to ensure that as many of those young people can move to state or private foster care as swiftly as possible. We are putting in place the right financial incentives to ensure that happens.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister is right that communication has been inadequate. When a safeguarding concern arises among asylum seekers staying in a hotel in Newham, the council does not get to hear about it even though it has the statutory responsibility. It seems that what is happening is that the contracting company—the company that contracts from the Department; in our case, it is Clearsprings—does get told. The council is supposed to be copied in but is not. Will he ensure that that particular aspect of communication is resolved?

Robert Jenrick: I will. The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. In recent months or years, the outsourcing partners have seen their relationship almost exclusively as one with the Home Office and not with the relevant local authority. I have made it clear to them that they have a dual duty to work closely with the Home Office and the local authority. He raises an important point and I will pass it on.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): There are now five hotels in Skegness occupied by asylum seekers and a further one in my constituency. I thank the Minister, and indeed the Home Secretary, for the engagement he has had with me ahead of what he knows will be a public meeting on Friday with a very concerned local community. I wonder if he could say what his message would be for that public meeting.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and wish him well with that meeting. We want to ensure that we exit hotels as swiftly as possible, and I set out in answers to other hon. Members how we will do that. I appreciate the burden that this is placing on his constituency and I hope the increase in engagement from the Home Office and its partners will ensure a better and more fruitful relationship with his local authorities.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just local authorities that need consultation, but the NHS. In York, 80 internationally recruited nurses have been displaced as a result of the Mears Group block-booking their hotel. The nurses were also sitting exams at a crucial time for their entry into the NHS. Some 150

more NHS nurses were due to be in that hotel. It is now costing the NHS at least £10 per nurse per night to try to accommodate them elsewhere. Can the Minister explain why they cannot remain in that hotel? Will he talk to the NHS to ensure that this does not happen again?

Robert Jenrick: I have spoken to the Minister with responsibility for secondary care about the broader issue of doctors, nurses and other clinicians staying in hotel accommodation and how we can have better communication between local NHS trusts, local authorities and the Home Office when hotels are procured, so I hope we will be able to improve processes and ensure it does not happen in future.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My right hon. Friend was exactly correct when he talked about the Labour years of backlogs. There were warehouses upon warehouses full of paper files. The Home Office referred to it as Layby. What additional funds have been offered by the Home Office to local councils and police forces to support activity with asylum seekers and others in hotels in their area, including the two hotels in Loughborough, neither of which the council or police knew about until I passed on the email I had received from the Home Office.

Robert Jenrick: We are providing local authorities with a per capita grant of £3,500 for any asylum seeker in their local authority area, which provides a base for the support they will need to give them. The hotels and other contingency accommodation are fully funded, in the sense that the provider should be providing food and other services, as well as basic security, for the site. We put in place a significant package around children. We are reviewing whether that is sufficient, given that we are finding it hard to get local authorities to take children out of hotels.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last week, the Secretary of State placed 90 asylum seekers in two unsuitable hotels in Shepherd's Bush. She did not tell the local authority. Some had immediate medical needs, some had no proper clothing, and they all had health and welfare needs. The council and local charities have stepped up now and are providing appropriate support—they are good at that and they care about vulnerable people. In future, can we have a week's notice? Can we be consulted on the numbers, the locations and the needs of the people involved? We are quite prepared to do our fair share, but we need that notice.

Robert Jenrick: I had a very productive meeting with London Councils. It raised questions, such as the one the hon. Gentleman raises. We will now be providing a full set of information about who is coming, what their prior medical conditions are, what nationalities they are and other matters that will be useful to local authorities. We are setting a minimum engagement period of 24 hours, but quite clearly that needs to be significantly more in future—at least a week—and I hope we can reach that within a matter of months.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): It has been determined in the courts that fear, and particularly the fear of crime, is a material planning consideration. The

Home Office is contracting hotels and other premises through third parties to house people who arrive illegally in this country—people on whom we have no background information and who may even have ill intent against our way of life. Although we should not be in this position in the first place, should local people not be consulted and local consent sought for housing people who are clearly not holidaymakers or business visitors, and should we not test whether the fear of crime locally has changed?

Robert Jenrick: We want to get to a point where there are multi-agency meetings prior to a final decision on a hotel or other sort of accommodation. That would involve full engagement with the local police force so that we could test, for example, far-right activity or public disorder. In my short tenure at the Department, I have seen a number of cases in which we have chosen not to proceed with accommodation on that basis, because it is very concerning when residents, or indeed migrants, are put in that situation. More broadly, when migrants arrive at Dover, we take biometrics, have counter-terrorism police officers there and do everything we can to screen them, prior to their moving on to other accommodation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The independent commission of inquiry into asylum provision in Scotland, which was set up by Refugees for Justice and is chaired expertly by Baroness Helena Kennedy, laid bare the deficiencies in the Home Office's approach to accommodating vulnerable people, which resulted in the Park Inn incident in my constituency and a suspected suicide in other accommodation in the city. At my surgeries week in, week out, I see families and people with vulnerabilities who have been sent to shoddy, poor, substandard accommodation by the Home Office while contractors rake in the profits. Will the Minister tell me how long it will be before people in my constituency can expect to be treated with dignity and respect by the Home Office?

Robert Jenrick: I have been clear from the beginning of my tenure that I want to ensure that we always provide decent, but not luxurious, accommodation to all asylum seekers. I will say, however, that the Scottish Government have a poor record in that regard. They have consistently failed to find hotels in Scotland and to disperse individuals. The fact that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom housing Homes for Ukraine individuals in cruise ships shows the Scottish Government's failure to find better accommodation.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): We would not need this debate if we did not have thousands of illegal immigrants amassing on French beaches. I know that my right hon. Friend is committed to cracking down on illegal immigration and breaking the business model of the criminal smuggling gangs. Does he agree that the problem is spread throughout Europe and that we need to work together with our European partners to break down the criminal gangs and stop them making money out of human trade?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a global migration crisis, and the mass movement of individuals across the world, including in Europe, will be one of the big features of the 21st century. We

[Robert Jenrick]

are committed to working with our friends and neighbours, as we saw from the Prime Minister's early success in securing a deal with President Macron. We would like to go further and will shortly convene the Calais group of—primarily—northern European nations to discuss what further steps we can take. If there are further ways that we can work with our partners to crack down on the pernicious people smugglers and criminal gangs, we absolutely will.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is nearly a week since I raised a point of order with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, about press reports over the private contractor charged with running a hotel for asylum seekers in my constituency. It had taken somebody who had been charged with the sexual assault of a child and then bailed, and it housed them in another hotel, from which they absconded. I asked for an urgent update from the Minister. I am pleased to hear that he has met with other MPs, but I have had no information about that.

The concerns about the safeguarding experience of private contractors are legion. The permanent secretary could not even tell MPs today whether there is a clear safeguarding policy that children should not be housed with strangers in these hotels. We are talking about children who are with their parents, so fostering is not a solution. Will the Minister finally publish the safeguarding requirements that are put in place for private contractors, so that we can hold them to account for their behaviour?

Robert Jenrick: I have been concerned by the reports that the hon. Lady raised and have asked my officials to investigate them. I would be happy to discuss them with her, if that would be useful. The most important thing is to ensure that hotels are run in a sensible and decent manner. If we are dealing with such large numbers of individuals, unfortunately, incidents will occasionally happen. That does not excuse them. They are completely unacceptable, and we need to ensure that the police vigorously investigate them when they arise.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The lack of consultation has been appalling for some time. As the Minister knows, we in Stoke-on-Trent have already done far more than our fair share. We have resettled hundreds in housing and are now being asked to do more to provide hotel spaces, which puts immense pressure on our council, the police, health services and schools. Where is the money to make sure that our services can cope with the additional pressures?

Robert Jenrick: We have provided £3,500 per asylum seeker to local authorities such as Stoke-on-Trent, so that they have further support. The hotels that have been procured there are fully funded and the services that wrap around them are paid for directly by the Home Office to the contractor. However, I do not doubt the pressure that is being put on places such as Stoke. That is one reason why we have done mandatory national dispersal, and we have instructed the Home Office and suppliers to find accommodation in a broader range of places across the country.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it not an Alice in Wonderland world when Conservative MPs call for the resignation of a Minister for trying clear up the mess caused by his boss and 12 years of failed policies that they have supported? Exeter has a proud tradition of welcoming refugees, who have enriched our city and contributed greatly to our city's economy, but when will the Minister offer my local council the longer notice period of more than 24 hours that he promised? Twenty-four hours is not enough and it is not acceptable for local authorities trying to help those people and provide decent services.

Robert Jenrick: In the letter that I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman and others, I said that 24 hours would be the bare minimum that we expect. I have asked officials to go beyond that already. I will ask for weekly updates on the performance against those standards and will review them progressively with a view to improving them. As I have said in answer to many questions, we want to improve this very significantly, as quickly as we can. In my tenure in the Department, the main bar on us has been ensuring that Manston was operating legally and decently. It is only that that has prevented us from implementing the standards sooner.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Will the Minister please ask the Home Office to set out a timetable for each hotel that it has used to accommodate asylum seekers so that they know when an assessment of each claimant will be made, conducted and finalised, and when such a hotel will return to its original use? By doing that, we will increase the efficiency of the system, benefit the asylum seeker, because they will know when it will be dealt with, help the local authority, and—probably most importantly—give confidence to our communities.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has raised those very valid points with me already. I will take them back to the Department to see what we can do to meet those standards in the future.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool is a proud city of sanctuary, and we have welcomed many people fleeing conflict, war and persecution. We currently house the highest number of dispersed asylum seekers in the region, totalling 1,500, but my city's resources are very stretched as a result of 12 years of austerity. Today I received a letter from my chief executive, who is concerned about the lack of consultation. He also let me know that the contingency hotel bed spaces are not included in the new asylum grant. Will the Minister, as a matter of urgency, provide Liverpool City Council with the funding and the resources for the public and the voluntary sector for the great work that they do to support these very desperate people?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to Liverpool City Council for the work that it is doing. We have set out a funding package for the council. I will be happy to keep in touch with the hon. Lady, if we are in a position to go further than that. I have always taken an interest in Liverpool and in trying to support it to ensure that it has better public services.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): My council was notified that it would be in receipt of 70 gentlemen on 22 December—not the best time of year to muster

statutory services and get the third sector involved to give them the support they need, but none the less it stepped up and did it. I pay tribute to the Furness Multi-Cultural Community Forum for what it has done, but those 70 gentlemen have faced challenges: we have a growing far-right presence in town, they are socially isolated and they are not getting the support they need. What will move them out of hotels and get them contributing to society is getting through the backlog, which now stands at 122,000. Will the Minister please explain what the Department is doing to chow through that backlog and get people contributing to society rather than languishing in hotels in our communities?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must power through the backlog, which has been allowed to reach an unacceptable level. We will do so by raising the productivity of teams and improving the management that oversees them. We will also look at how we prioritise cases, because some will have much higher grant rates than others. Anything further we can do to improve the situation, we will do. Improving the backlog is not the source of the issue; the source of the issue is the sheer quantity of people crossing the channel illegally. As much of our effort as possible needs to be focused on that, rather than on the symptoms of the problem.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): The Minister may say that this is a new problem, but 16 months ago hundreds of Afghans were moved into Southwark with zero advance notice, including into hostel accommodation that Public Health England advised the Home Office not to use. Will the Minister thank Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers, Southwark Council and all the volunteers who have worked so hard to provide a welcome to such a large group of vulnerable people? Does he recognise the cross-party consensus today that the Home Office has failed on this issue among many others? Will he consider passing asylum accommodation provision to local authorities, with full resources to cover all associated costs, including those of emergency children's services?

Robert Jenrick: We want to have the most productive relationship with local government that we possibly can. As a former Local Government Secretary, I know

just how effective local government can be in dealing with challenging situations. The task for local authorities now is to respond to our request for full national dispersal, which means working with the Home Office to find decent accommodation in all parts of the country and, with respect to children, helping us to find state or private foster carers or care home places so that we can ensure that young people are taken out of unacceptable hotels and brought into communities where they get good-quality care as quickly as possible.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way to tackle overcrowding in processing centres and end the use of hotels is to prevent the illegal crossings from happening in the first place, and that urgent delivery of the Rwanda scheme is essential to solving this crisis?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need a system with deterrence at its heart. That means ensuring that those who come here illegally in small boats cannot find a path to a life here in the UK. The Rwanda policy is an important part of that and is currently in the courts. I am confident that we will win the arguments; when we do, we will implement the policy as soon as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I believe that the processing system for asylum applications is at the root of the issue. It must be solved. Although I recognise that putting families into hotels for long periods is far from ideal, they are met with safe, secure and warm conditions, and in most cases medication and shelter are provided as well. Does the Minister agree that to tackle the problem, the Home Office must employ more staff to ensure that asylum applications are processed urgently, in a timely manner?

Robert Jenrick: I am increasing the personnel making decisions from about 1,000 to 1,500. However, the team who do the work have greater resources today than prior to the pandemic, yet productivity has fallen, so this is not primarily an issue of productivity. It is about processes and leadership as well.

Points of Order

2.23 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. After the news today that Manchester United is to be sold by the asset-stripping Glazer family, have you or the Speaker's Office received any notification that a Minister will come to the House to explain why the Government shelved the fan-led review, leaving fans with no protection against their club being sold to whoever can stump up the cash, whether they care about the club and the community or not?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for notice of his point of order. I have not received any notification that a Minister intends to make a statement, but those on the Treasury Bench will have heard and, I am sure, noted his concerns.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Prime Minister's questions, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) referred to the channel deaths this time last year. She said:

"New evidence suggests that the boat reached British waters and that the French and British authorities knew that it was in distress for a very long time."

That is not correct. Today's *Daily Mail* and the French newspapers report that investigations by the French police have found that the French did not send help, following several calls while the boat was in distress in French waters, and furthermore that French officers may yet face manslaughter charges in relation to those tragic deaths. In relation to the reports about the boat entering British waters, it has been reported that Britain was not told that the boat was in distress at the time it entered British waters, that Britain acted immediately when notified, having saved a number of other people in small boats on the same day, and did everything it could to save those lives.

Many of my constituents work for Border Force or the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Some of them were on duty on that dreadful day. They work tirelessly,

day in, day out, in difficult and exhausting circumstances, to pick up and rescue migrants in the channel. I am pleased that the hon. Lady is in the Chamber. I hope that she will join me in paying tribute to those who save lives at sea every day, including in relation to the channel migration issue. I hope that she will clarify the record and await the findings of the official reports before traducing the reputation of Border Force and the RNLI. Will she also take steps to ensure that she does nothing to damage this important investigation, which may yet lead to criminal charges?

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not going to withdraw the comments that I made in my question, because—[*Interruption.*] I will explain why, if colleagues would like to listen. In my question, which the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) quoted, I said:

"New evidence suggests that the boat reached British waters and that the French and British authorities knew that it was in distress for a very long time."

The bodies and the survivors were not found until 2 pm the next day. By my judgment, that is a long time for both the British and the French authorities to know about people in distress. Something had obviously not happened. We need the investigation to conclude, but everything from the French investigation side and in leaked reports is in the public domain; it has been reported by *Le Monde*, by *The Guardian* and by many newspapers. I think that the hon. Member has misinterpreted what I said.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for her point of order. I am pleased that she notified the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) that she intended to raise the matter.

Obviously there are differing views. I am not responsible for the comments that hon. Members make; they are responsible for their own comments. There are ways of correcting the record should hon. Members wish to do so, either now or in future, but it is not for me to judge between two differing interpretations of events. I think we will leave it there.

Pre-payment Meters (Self-disconnection)

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

2.28 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require energy companies to allow a grace period before disconnecting customers with pre-payment meters who have run out of credit; to require energy companies to offer debt management support to all customers; and for connected purposes.

I pay my gas and electricity bills by standing order, and I pay in arrears. If I stop paying those bills, I can be disconnected by my supplier, but it is very much a final step and a last resort. Not so for those who pay in advance—that is, those on prepayment meters. Should they be unable to pay for gas or electricity, disconnection is the first thing that happens to them. The minute they go over the £10 of emergency credit applied to each prepayment meter, their supply stops and they are considered to have self-disconnected. We, as well-paid MPs, could run up hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pounds' worth of debt to energy companies before they disconnect our supply, while those on prepayment meters will be left to freeze in the dark the minute they owe just £10. It is that iniquity that my Bill seeks to address.

There is more that I could have asked for in the Bill around the broader iniquity of the treatment of those on prepayment meters, but I decided to make it as easy and straightforward as possible. The Bill asks for one thing only: to put an end to those on prepayment meters being treated differently from those of us who enjoy the benefit of paying in arrears. My Bill asks for so-called self-disconnection to be stopped. I can think of no reason for any fair-minded person not to support that request. I am hopeful, verging on confident, that the Government will agree to it, but they need to act quickly. I cannot be standing here in a year's time next winter talking about how we are nudging toward getting this resolved.

Call me impatient, but I know how slowly things often move in this place. I also know that the Government can move quickly when they need to. I contend that if I have to wait even until the new year, given the winter that has been predicted, I will have waited too long. More importantly, people on prepayment meters will have waited too long. It is not melodramatic or even an exaggeration to say that, if we do not deal with this urgently, I am afraid that people will die—people who would have lived had my Bill been adopted. All this when energy companies are raking in billions and bragging that they literally do not know what to do with their profits. Why is none of them leading the charge, instead of waiting for legislation possibly to get through? I am using this 10-minute rule Bill slot to challenge publicly just one of them to step forward and announce an end to the practice.

Let me give Members some background facts. We know that those on prepayment meters are generally on a low income. Some find it easier to budget if they can pay as they go, but most are given no choice. They struggle to pay their bills, so their energy supplier gains entry to their home and installs a prepayment meter. We

also know that they pay more per unit of energy and higher daily standing charges than the rest of us, and they pay in advance while the rest of us pay in arrears. Normally, advance payments attract discounts, but that is not so for those on prepayment meters.

We know from the low uptake of pension credit that pensioners are often the last to reach out and ask for help. That means that many of them are existing on far less than the Government believe that they need, and many of those people are on prepayment meters. Caroline Abrahams of Age UK recently said that, for an older person, being cold

“even for just a short amount of time can be very dangerous as it increases the risk of associated health problems and preventable deaths during the winter.”

We simply cannot let pensioners self-disconnect this winter. They must be treated at least equally to MPs when it comes to the right to be warm. The right to be treated equally is crucial, because the only arguments that I have heard against the proposal are that people could end up in debt and that they might simply not bother to pay their bills. On the latter point, I would argue very strongly that those on prepayment meters are no more likely simply not to bother to pay their bills than those of us paying by different methods.

It is a risk that stopping self-disconnection could lead to people being in debt, but to that I would say two things. First, if the rest of us, paying by different methods, are allowed to take the risk of ending up in debt and are trusted to find ways to resolve it without being cut off, why not those on prepayment meters? Secondly, at the end of the day, if anyone in the Chamber were asked to choose between debt or death for their constituent, who among us would not choose debt as the lesser of two evils? That may sound dramatic, but life is very dramatic and unpredictable at the moment, and our constituents' lives will be at risk.

I ask whichever MP will be on duty to shout “Object!” to my Bill on Second Reading to prevent it from going any further, as is common practice—unless they are planning to do it today—to be aware of the choice that they are making for their constituents on prepayment meters. We all have many such constituents. The last figures that we can access tell us that almost 4.2 million people are on prepayment meters. In Glasgow, there are almost 67,000, but even in the Prime Minister's local authority there are more than 1,000 and in your local authority, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am sure that you know this—the figure is 16,596. Those figures were last published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in 2019, so we do not have an exact number, but clearly the numbers are rising. Figures from Ofgem comparison website Uswitch recently revealed that 60,000 new prepayment meters were installed across the UK in the six months to March. Does it not seem perverse that as energy prices and energy company profits soar, poor and vulnerable people are being forced on to more expensive methods of paying for that energy?

I recently had a meeting with the Simon Community, one of the leading homelessness organisations in Scotland. It told me that many of the people it has been supporting to get off the streets and into a tenancy have found their new-found optimism to be short lived when they face the problem of being on a prepayment meter. The warmth and comfort that has eluded them for so long is again taken away when they run out of money, as many

[Anne McLaughlin]

do because, having been homeless and having lived without an address, and for some having battled health problems, many are not yet in employment, or certainly not in well-paid employment. In no time, they are back to square one. According to the Simon Community, people have been walking the streets to keep warm. What an utterly ridiculous and cruel situation.

Who else will have their lives put at risk if energy companies do not stop the practice? Perhaps most disturbing of all is the case of those whose life expectancy has already been curtailed. I am talking about those who are terminally ill. When the Bill appeared on the Order Paper, I was contacted by Marie Curie, which as many colleagues will know has a campaign called “Dying in poverty”. It has been telling MPs about the additional costs incurred by the use of vital medical equipment such as breathing devices. It told me that the average cost of an electricity bill can rise by 75% for someone who is terminally ill. That is bad enough, but for someone on a prepayment meter, so-called self-disconnection really becomes life threatening.

In addition, people often find when they return home after a lengthy stay in hospital or a hospice that they have a huge bill to pay before they can access electricity because, despite not being at home, the daily standing charges have mounted up and the meter will take that money first. How can we do that to people? I ask that without apportioning blame politically, because I do not believe that anyone in this place would intend that to happen or try to justify it. I said earlier that I was feeling hopeful, verging on confident, that the Government would listen and act. I am usually very critical of the Government but I simply do not believe that they would wish this on any of our constituents. Nor do I believe that they would knowingly allow anyone, and certainly not pensioners, people who have been homeless and those who are already dying, to suffer in such a way when they and I, as well-paid MPs and Government Ministers, with no excuse to run up debts, would none the less be allowed to do so and thus keep our homes warm, simply because we pay in a different way.

I often criticise the Government for their lack of action on equalities, but this is a very stark inequality on which I believe they will agree with me. I reiterate that my Bill asks for one thing only: for those on prepayment meters to have equal treatment to that of all other bill payers when it comes to disconnection. I want an end to so-called self-disconnection. It is cruel, dangerous and will end the lives of our constituents prematurely if we do not stop it. But we can stop it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Anne McLaughlin, Craig Whittaker, Sally-Ann Hart, Alison Thewliss, Alan Brown, Stuart C. McDonald, Jeremy Corbyn, Liz Saville Roberts, Colum Eastwood, Kate Osborne, Bell Ribeiro-Addy and Stewart Malcolm McDonald present the Bill.

Anne McLaughlin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 198).

LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 3)

Ordered,

That the Order of 8 June 2022 (Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: Programme), as varied on 22 September 2022 (Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: Programme (No. 2)), be further varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Consideration—

(a) shall be taken on each of those days in the order shown in the first column of the following Table, and

(b) shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

Proceedings	Time for conclusion of proceedings
First day	
New Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 1, 2, 7, 8 or 9, Clauses 187 to 190 or Schedule 17; amendments to Parts 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9, Clauses 187 to 190 and Schedule 17.	The moment of interruption on the first day
Second day	
New Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 3, 4, 5, 6 or 11 and any other new Clauses and new Schedules; amendments to Parts 3, 4, 5, 6 and 11; remaining proceedings on Consideration.	One hour before the moment of interruption on the second day

(4) Proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken on the second day and shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the second day.
—(Dehenna Davison.)

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

[1ST ALLOCATED DAY]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 61

DESIGNATION OF KEY ROUTE NETWORK ROADS

w(1) A CCA may designate a highway or proposed highway in its area as a key route network road, or remove its designation as a key route network road, with the consent of—

- (a) each constituent council in whose area the highway or proposed highway is, and
- (b) in the case of a mayoral CCA, the mayor.

(2) The Secretary of State may designate a highway or proposed highway in the area of a CCA as a key route network road, or remove its designation as a key route network road, if requested to do so by—

- (a) the CCA,
- (b) the mayor (if any) of the CCA, or
- (c) a constituent council.

(3) A designation or removal under this section must be in writing and must state when it comes into effect.

(4) The Secretary of State must send a copy of a designation or removal under subsection (2) to the CCA in question at least 7 days before the date on which it comes into effect.

(5) A CCA must publish each designation or removal under this section of a key route network road within its area before the date on which it comes into effect.

(6) A CCA that has key route network roads in its area must keep a list or map (or both) accessible to the public showing those roads.

(7) The requirements in section 20(11) and section 27(11)(a) do not apply to provision under section 20(1) and section 27(1) contained in the same instrument so far as that provision—

- (a) confers a power of direction on an existing mayoral CCA regarding the exercise of an eligible power in respect of key route network roads in the area of that CCA,
- (b) provides for that power of direction to be exercisable only by the mayor of the CCA, and
- (c) is made with the consent of the mayor after the mayor has consulted the constituent councils.

(8) When a mayor consents under subsection (7)(c), the mayor must give the Secretary of State—

- (a) a statement by the mayor that all of the constituent councils agree to the making of the regulations, or
- (b) if the mayor is unable to make that statement, the reasons why the mayor considers the regulations should be made even though not all of the constituent councils agree to them being made.

(9) In this section—

- “eligible power” has the meaning given by section 20(2);
- “key route network road” means a highway or proposed highway designated for the time being under this section as a key route network road;
- “proposed highway” means land on which, in accordance with plans made by a highway authority, that authority are for the time being constructing or intending to construct a highway shown in the plans.”

This new clause provides for designation of “key route network roads” in CCAs and makes provision about consent requirements for regulations that both confer a power of direction concerning such roads and make the power exercisable only by the mayor. It will be inserted after clause 21.—(Dehenna Davison.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clause 62—*Functions in respect of key route network roads.*

Government new clause 65—*Participation of police and crime commissioners at certain local authority committees.*

New clause 1—*Power to provide for an elected mayor—*

(1) Part 1A of the Local Government Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 9K insert—

“9KA *Power to provide for an elected mayor*

- (1) The Secretary of State may by regulations provide for there to be a mayor of a local authority.
- (2) Before making regulations under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report which contains—
 - (a) an assessment of why it is in the interests of economy, efficiency, effectiveness or public safety for the regulations to be made, and
 - (b) a description of any public consultation the Secretary of State has carried out on the proposal for the regulations to be made.”

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State to provide for there to be a mayor of any local authority if they deem appropriate.

New clause 2—*Resignation requirements for MPs serving as elected mayors—*

“(1) The Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 is amended in accordance with subsection.

(2) In section 67 (Disqualification of person holding office as police and crime commissioner), leave out paragraph (a).

(3) Schedule 1 to the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 is amended as follows.

(4) In Part 3 (Other Disqualifying Offices), at the appropriate place insert—

‘Mayor who is to exercise the functions of police and crime commissioner’”.

This new clause would allow an MP who is elected as a mayor who is to exercise the functions of a police and crime commissioner to remain as an MP until the next parliamentary election.

New clause 4—*Housing Act 1985—*

“In section 618 of the Housing Act 1985 (The Common Council of the City of London), omit subsections (3) and (4).”

This new clause would correct a disparity which applies uniquely to Members of the City of London’s Common Council in relation to their ability to discuss or vote on local authority matters relating to land, for example housing, by removing a prohibition on participating on such matters.

New clause 7—*Council tax: properties of multiple occupancy—*

“(1) The Local Government Finance Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 3 (meaning of “dwelling”), after subsection (4A), insert—

- ‘(4B) Subject to subsection (6) below, the following property is not a dwelling—
 - (a) a room or bedroom subject to a tenancy agreement that does not contain bathroom and cooking facilities within its physical curtilage;

- (b) a room or bedroom subject to a tenancy agreement which includes bathroom facilities but does not include cooking facilities within its physical curtilage;
- (c) any rooms or bedrooms within a licensed House of Multiple Occupancy; and
- (d) any room which is not in law a self-contained unit regardless of any clause, term or condition of any contract, license of agreement conferring a right to occupy that room.”

This new clause is intended to prevent the imposition of Council Tax individually on tenants of a room in a house with shared facilities, or in a licensed House of Multiple Occupancy.

New clause 41—Duty to provide sufficient resources to Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities—

“(1) This section applies where the Government has committed funding to a Combined Authority or a Combined County Authority in order to deliver a specific project.

(2) The Secretary of State must provide commensurate financial resources to a Combined Authority or a Combined County Authority to enable the delivery of the project mentioned in subsection (1) as agreed in full.

(3) The Secretary of States must, by regulations, amend the value of this funding to reflect inflation.”

This new clause would commit the Government to fully funding combined authority and combined county authority projects they have committed to in the case that costs rise due to inflation.

New clause 45—Local authorities to be allowed to choose their own voting system—

“(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations provide that local authorities may choose the voting system used for local elections in their areas.

(2) When determining whether to seek to introduce a new voting system a local authority must have regard to the benefits of reinvigorating local democracy in its area.

(3) Regulations under this section must provide that local authorities may choose to elect councillors—

- (a) by thirds, or
- (b) on an all-out basis.

(4) Regulations under this section must provide that local authorities may choose to elect councillors using—

- (a) first-past-the-post;
- (b) alternative vote;
- (c) supplementary vote;
- (d) single transferable vote;
- (e) the additional member system;
- (f) any other system that may be prescribed in the regulations.

(5) Regulations under this section may make provision about—

- (a) how a local authority may go about seeking to change its voting system,
- (b) the decision-making process for such a change,
- (c) consultation, and
- (d) requirements relating to approval by the local electorate.”

This new clause would enable local authorities to choose what voting system they use for local elections.

New clause 46—Review into business rates system—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must undertake a review of the business rates system.

(2) The review must consider the extent to which the business rates system—

- (a) is achieving its objectives,
- (b) is conducive to the achievement of the levelling-up and regeneration objectives of this Act.

(3) The review must consider whether alternatives of local business taxation would be more likely to achieve the objectives in subsections (2)(a) and (b).

(4) The review must in particular consider the effects of business rates and alternative local business taxation systems on—

- (a) high streets, and
- (b) rural areas.

(5) The review must consider the merits of devolving more control over local business taxation to local authorities.

(6) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a report of the review before parliament before the end of the period of one year beginning with the day on which this Act is passed.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review the business rates system.

New clause 70—Duties in connection with the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities—

“(1) The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 is amended in accordance with subsection (2).

(2) In section 16 (Power to transfer etc public authority functions to certain local authorities), after subsection (1) insert—

- ‘(1A) In deciding how and whether to exercise his power under section 16(1), the Secretary of State must have regard to the existence, within a local authority area, of a national minority as defined by the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.’”

New clause 71—Extending level 3 devolution deals—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, make provision for local authorities to be granted a Level 3 devolution deal, without the requirement for a directly-elected leader across the entire authority.

(2) When making regulations under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must have regard to the benefits of such a devolution arrangement given any existence, within a local authority area, of a national minority, as defined by the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.”

New clause 34—Review of compulsory purchase powers—

“(1) The Secretary of State must undertake a review of whether the powers of compulsory purchase available to—

- (a) local authorities, and
- (b) the Secretary of State

are adequate to meet the objectives of this Act.

(2) In undertaking the review the Secretary of State must, in particular, consider—

- (a) whether existing statutory time limits for compulsory purchase action are appropriate,
 - (b) other means of accelerating compulsory purchase action with particular reference to properties to which subsection (3) applies, and
 - (c) the adequacy of compulsory purchase powers in relation to properties to which subsection (3) applies.
- (3) This subsection applies to—

- (a) properties that have been unoccupied for a prolonged period (with reference to the vacancy condition in section 152), and
- (b) buildings of local public importance such as hotels and high street properties.”

This new clause would require the Government to review powers of compulsory purchase and whether they are adequate to meet its levelling-up and regeneration objectives.

New clause 74—Commencement of Section 81 of the Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act—

“The Secretary of State must, by regulations, bring into force the provisions in Section 81 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 no later than 31st December 2022”

New clause 75—Review of the effectiveness of the Housing First Scheme—

(1) The Secretary of State must establish an annual review of His Majesty's Government's progress on reducing homelessness.

(2) The review must include an assessment of—

- (a) whether the Housing First scheme is achieving its objectives,
- (b) the support provided to local authorities to meet their homelessness duties,
- (c) the merits of ensuring that local authorities have at least one provider of the Housing First model, and
- (d) the Government's progress towards ending rough sleeping.

(3) The Secretary of State must prepare reports on these reviews in accordance with this section.

(4) The first report under subsection (3) must be laid before each House of Parliament before the end of a period of one year beginning on the day when this Act was passed.

(5) After a report has been laid before Parliament under subsection (4), the Secretary of State must publish it as soon as is reasonably practicable."

New clause 76—Publication of the Consultation on the Vagrancy Act—

"(1) The Secretary of State must, before the end of 2022, publish a report setting out the results of the Review of the Vagrancy Act: consultation on effective replacement.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must, in particular, set out—

- (a) how to replace the offences in the Vagrancy Act which prohibit begging and rough sleeping in an appropriate way that prioritises getting individuals into support, and
- (b) the Government's legislative plan to support these changes.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the report in subsection (1) before both Houses of Parliament."

New clause 82—Standards Board for England—

"(1) There is to be a body corporate known as the Standards Board for England ("the Standards Board").

(2) The Standards Board is to consist of not less than three members appointed by the Secretary of State.

(3) In exercising its functions the Standards Board must have regard to the need to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of local authorities in England.

(4) The Secretary of State must by regulations make further provision about the Standards Board.

(5) Regulations under this section must provide for—

- (a) a code of conduct of behaviour for members and co-opted members of local authorities in England,
- (b) the making of complaints to the Standards Board a member or co-opted member has failed to comply with that code of conduct,
- (c) the independent handling of such complaints in the first instance by the Standards Board,
- (d) the functions of ethical standards officers,
- (e) investigations and reports by such officers,
- (f) the role of monitoring officers of local authorities in such complaints,
- (g) the referral of cases to the adjudication panel for England for determination,
- (h) about independent determination by the adjudication panel its issuing of sanctions,
- (i) appeal by the complainant to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman,
- (j) appeal by the member or co-opted member subject to the complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, and

(k) the governance of the Standards Board.

(6) In making regulations under this section the Secretary of State must have regard to the content of Chapter II (investigations etc: England) of Part III (conduct of local government members and employees) of the Local Government Act 2000, prior to the repeal of that Chapter.

(7) The Standards Board—

- (a) must appoint employees known as ethical standards officers,
- (b) may issue guidance to local authorities in England on matters relating to the conduct of members and co-opted members of such authorities,
- (c) may issue guidance to local authorities in England in relation to the qualifications or experience which monitoring officers should possess, and
- (d) may arrange for any such guidance to be made public."

This new clause seeks to reinstate the Standards Board for England, which was abolished by the Localism Act 2011, but with the removal of referral to standards committees and the addition of appeal to the Local Government Ombudsman.

New clause 84—Levelling-up mission: adult literacy—

"(1) Each statement of levelling-up missions must include an objective relating to reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy.

(2) In pursuance of the objective in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must, during each mission period, review adult literacy levels in the UK, to inform measures with the purpose of reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy and eradicating illiteracy in adults.

(3) The findings of any review under this section must be published in a report, which must be laid before Parliament.

(4) When a report under this section is laid before Parliament, the government must also publish a strategy setting out steps it intends to take to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK."

This new clause would require the government to include the reducing of geographical disparities in adult literacy as one of its levelling up missions, and it would require them, during each mission period, to review levels of adult literacy in the UK, publish the findings of that review and set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK.

Amendment 8, in clause 1, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

"(c) the independent body that His Majesty's Government proposes to use to evaluate progress in delivering those levelling-up missions ('the independent evaluating body')."

This amendment would place a responsibility on the Government to commission an independent body to scrutinise their progress against levelling-up missions.

Amendment 9, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

"(c) the resources made available by His Majesty's Government to nations, regions, sub-regions and local areas in order to level-up."

This amendment would place a responsibility on the Government to publish the resources made available to communities in order to level-up.

Amendment 71, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

"(c) details of how His Majesty's Government will ensure that the levelling-up missions are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round."

This amendment would require that levelling-up missions align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people to safe and nutritious food.

Amendment 69, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(2A) The first statement of levelling-up missions must include a requirement that by 2030 the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK.

(2B) For the purposes of subsection (2A), ‘high-quality skills training’ must include training for the purpose of proactively supporting workers in high-carbon industries wishing to transition to careers in the green energy sector, with cross-sector recognition of skills and regardless of their current contract status.”

Amendment 70, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(2A) The first statement of levelling-up missions must include a mission to expand public access to waterways, woodlands, Green Belt and grasslands and reduce geographical inequalities in access to open access land.

(2B) In this section, “waterways” includes any river, stream, lake, pond, canal or other waterway physically capable of navigation, and any such river banks or land adjacent as necessary for the act of navigation and for other purposes incidental to navigation or to bathe.

(2C) A levelling-up mission under this section must be accompanied by a statement of the Government’s legislative plan to support the mission, including proposals to amend the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.”

Amendment 72, page 2, line 3, at end insert—

“(3A) The mission progress methodology and metrics must include the following indicators—

(a) prevalence of undernourishment in the population, and

(b) prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population, based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES).”

This amendment would require that the mission progress methodology and metrics include the prevalence of under-nourishment and the prevalence of food insecurity in the population.

Amendment 10, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(4A) A statement of levelling-up missions must be accompanied by an action plan which sets out details of how His Majesty’s Government intends to deliver these missions by the target date.”

This amendment would require the Government to publish an action plan alongside a statement of levelling-up missions which sets out how they will deliver the missions.

Amendment 11, in clause 2, page 3, line 7, leave out subsections (4) and (5).

This amendment would remove the provision allowing the Secretary of State to discontinue a levelling-up mission.

Amendment 12, in clause 3, page 3, line 28, leave out “120” and insert “30”.

This amendment would reduce the period of time by which a report under section 2 must be laid before each House of Parliament to 30 days.

Amendment 13, page 3, line 32, leave out “120” and insert “30”.

See explanatory statement to Amendment 12

Amendment 14, page 4, line 2, leave out clause 4.

This amendment would remove the provision allowing a Minister to make changes to mission progress methodology and metrics or target dates.

Amendment 64, in clause 4, page 4, line 18, leave out from “which” to end of line 19 and insert—

“both conditions in subsection (4) have been met.

(4) The conditions are that—

(a) the House of Commons,

(b) the House of Lords

have passed a Motion in the form in subsection (5).

(5) The form of the Motion is—

That this House approves the revisions to the levelling-up mission progress methodology and metrics or target date made under section 4 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2022 and laid before Parliament on [date].”

Amendment 15, in clause 5, page 5, line 18, at end insert—

“(ca) state whether the independent evaluating body considers that pursuing the levelling-up missions in that statement is effectively contributing to the reduction of geographical disparities in the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would require the report on a review of statements of levelling-up missions to include the assessment of the independent evaluating body.

Amendment 16, page 6, line 5, leave out from “which” to end of subsection (11) and insert—

“both conditions in subsection (12) have been met.

(12) The conditions are that—

(a) the House of Commons, and

(b) the House of Lords

has passed a Motion of the form in subsection (13).

(13) The form of the Motion is—

That this House approves the revisions to the statement of levelling-up missions made under section 5 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2022 and laid before Parliament on [date].”

This amendment would require both Houses of Parliament to approve revisions to the statement of levelling-up missions to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before they have effect.

Amendment 17, page 12, line 24, leave out clause 16.

Government amendments 29, 45 and 46.

Amendment 18, in clause 52, page 45, line 16, leave out “may” and insert—

“must, within 6 months of the day on which this Act is passed.”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to produce guidance on the establishment and operation of CCAs within 6 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.

Amendment 19, page 50, line 24, leave out clause 58.

This amendment would remove Clause 58, which allows an elected mayor to assume policing responsibilities without the consent of the combined authority.

Government amendments 47, 40 to 44, 1, 60, 51, 61 and 62.

Dehenna Davison: It is a pleasure to be here for the next stage of this vital Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently set out his guiding principles for the Bill: beauty, infrastructure, democracy, environment and neighbourhoods—or, for acronym fans, BIDEN. We want to ensure that people across the country have the opportunity to live and work in beautiful places, supported by the right infrastructure, with strong locally accountable leadership and with better access to an improved environment, all rooted in thriving neighbourhoods of which they can be proud. Regrettably, though, there are areas of the country that are long neglected and that will require a concerted effort from us all. We have to put an end to the shameful waste of potential that has held so many of our constituents and our country back for so long.

This is why the ambitions set out in the levelling up White Paper are so crucial. If we are going to achieve our ambitions, we have to be focused. That is why the first part of the Bill creates a self-renewing national focus on this endeavour, through the setting of and reporting on missions to level up. These missions, with their clear, measurable objectives, will drive the action needed to reduce geographic disparities. One such mission is our vision for devolution across England. This is why the Bill creates a new model for devolution: the combined county authority. It also improves existing models thought the combined authority and county deal models, making devolution easier to achieve, extend and deepen.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): One of the disappointments with this Bill is that, although it extends the principle of combined authorities to county areas, it does not actually transfer any new powers to local government as a whole that are not currently available in some authorities. Could the Minister point out one place in the Bill where a new power that is currently not devolved to local government will be devolved after the Bill is passed?

Dehenna Davison: The Chair of the Select Committee is a passionate campaigner on these issues. He will know that the Government are incredibly keen on empowering local areas to take on their own devolution deals, and that is why we are in the process of negotiating a large number of deals, including trailblazer deals with Greater Manchester and with the West Midlands, which I know Members right across the House are incredibly passionate about. We are looking at new powers and new funding to ensure that those devolution deals deliver for local people.

We are making it easier to achieve, to extend and to deepen devolution. At the same time, the Bill is making it easier for local authorities to regenerate their areas by providing them with new and improved tools for that purpose, including a new locally led model for urban development corporations, changes to ensure that any former development corporation can have conferred on it the functions most useful to its purpose, and improvement to the compulsory system to remove barriers so that authorities can assemble land, including brownfield land.

Mr Betts: Often, when compulsory purchase powers are used by local authorities, the value of the site they are purchasing is enhanced because they are using those powers and the owner of the site gets a “hope value” addition to what they receive. Would the Minister consider ensuring that, where a CPO has been put in place, no extra value is generated for the owner because the CPO itself is operated or because it is part of a regeneration site as a whole?

Dehenna Davison: I am happy to discuss that with the hon. Member in further detail following the debate today. It is certainly something that we are exploring behind the scenes with a view to taking action at a later date.

We are also looking at introducing discretion for local authorities to increase council tax on second homes and long-term empty homes, together with innovative high street rental auctions to tackle the damage that the gradual erosion of high street occupancy can cause.

Hon. Members will recall that the Government have already made provision for the full repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824. As the Secretary of State has said, the Vagrancy Act is outdated and has to go. This Bill was introduced initially with a placeholder clause, allowing for a replacement to the Act to be added. During the passage of the Bill, however, we have listened to the depth of feeling from Members across the House, and particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who has campaigned passionately on this issue. After working with Members across the House and having reflected on the right approach to the replacement legislation, I have tabled amendments to remove the placeholder clause. I can commit to the House that the Government will not bring forward any amendments to the Bill on this subject. We will, though, be working with the Home Office to make sure that the police and others have the tools they need to protect communities and ensure that people feel safe.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I absolutely welcome the Government’s action on this. Does the Minister agree that the best way to deal with the street population is through proper outreach and not through criminalising their behaviour?

2.45 pm

Dehenna Davison: I completely agree with that sentiment. Any new legislation that may be introduced at a future date will not be looking to criminalise anyone for just being homeless. That is a firm commitment that I can make here today. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let us look at the Government’s rough sleeping strategy as an example, and at the other ways we can outreach to ensure that those who find themselves homeless, often through no fault of their own, find the support they need to get back on their feet.

On vagrancy, my colleagues and I look forward to continuing to work with Members across the House on our goal of ending rough sleeping and ensuring that people in need receive appropriate support to help them move away from life on the streets for good.

Strengthening our communities also means strengthening local leadership. We all know from our constituencies that Whitehall, however well intentioned, cannot always understand a community as well as the local people who live and work within it, so our ambition is for local areas to determine their own futures, allowing local leaders to take charge and enable their communities to thrive. We therefore want to offer the option of a devolution deal with a directly elected leader to every part of England that wants one by 2030, creating clear local leadership and greater accountability for any new powers conferred on them.

Members will recall that the Bill puts in place a framework to achieve this by creating a new model of combined authority—a combined county authority—which is more suitable for areas outside urban centres. This means that areas and communities everywhere, not just in major cities, can benefit from bespoke devolution deals that work for them. Providing these opportunities for all communities across England will increase innovation and enhance local accountability. This in turn will lead to more co-ordinated decision making with greater flexibility over funding, all of which will empower areas to attract more inward investment.

[*Dehenna Davison*]

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have been grateful for the support that our reforms have attracted in our discussions with hon. Members and local areas, and Members will be aware that our devolution negotiations and conversations are continuing at pace. In the summer, we announced new devolution deals with York and North Yorkshire, and with parts of the east midlands: Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. There are more deals to be signed soon. Implementation of the east midlands deal is dependent on provisions in this Bill gaining Royal Assent and coming into effect, but they will of course be subject to statutory processes, including parliamentary approval of secondary legislation on creating new institutions with the devolved powers. The invaluable feedback from our discussions so far has allowed us to table three amendments today to put some matters beyond doubt.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Minister is talking a lot about those areas where there is devolution already or where there is the potential for devolution, but what about those areas where there seems to be an absence of any discussions?

Dehenna Davison: As I say, we have discussions under way at the moment and we are looking ahead to which new devolution deals we can start exploring. I am certainly happy to work with my hon. Friend to see if this is something we can deliver in his local area in Cumbria, too.

Our first amendment relates to clause 16, which allows the conferral of local authority functions, including those of county councils, unitary councils and district councils, on to a combined county authority, or CCA.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because this is of seminal importance to all second-tier councils around the country. I therefore welcome Government amendment 29. Can she confirm, for the avoidance of any doubt, that this means, as the explanatory statement suggests, that there is no question of the functions of a district council in a two-tier area being handled by a combined county authority and that, although it says

“a CCA may make provision”,

a CCA cannot make provision where there is a second-tier council?

Dehenna Davison: I can confirm that, and my hon. Friend pre-empted the next bit of my speech, which will hopefully provide some reassurance.

Clause 16 is essential to enable CCAs to be conferred with, for example, the economic development and regeneration functions of a council so that it can deliver them over a wider area, thus driving growth. Although it was never the Government’s intention, we have heard concerns from colleagues on both sides of the House, as well as from local authorities and the District Councils Network, that the clause could be used for the purpose of upward devolution. So there can be absolutely no doubt, we are explicitly precluding the conferral of two-tier district council functions on to a combined county authority. This amendment reflects the

Government’s commitment that devolution legislation will not be used to reallocate functions between tiers of local government.

Government amendment 29 will still allow for combined county authorities to exercise functions with district councils concurrently or jointly, facilitating joint working on important issues where there is a local wish to do so. I hope that addresses the concern embodied in amendment 17, tabled in the name of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is not currently in the Chamber.

Our second amendment provides for the effective co-ordination of highways infrastructure, to enable key route networks to operate effectively. Improving key route networks across towns and cities is a Government priority, and we want to facilitate the improvement of transport links as much as possible. The co-ordination of transport across the area of a combined authority or combined county authority is a tool that local leaders across the country have told us is valuable. We therefore propose an amendment to meet the commitment in the levelling-up White Paper to provide a new power of direction for Mayors and combined county authorities, to increase Mayors’ control over key route networks. This will enable them to better co-ordinate the delivery of highways infrastructure, which is needed for effective key route networks across the whole of their authority area.

Our third amendment is a small amendment to improve the partnership between police and crime commissioners and local leaders by clarifying legislation to ensure that PCCs can participate in local government committee meetings. Stronger partnership working between local leaders is central to the Government’s priority of ensuring that local voices are heard on important issues and that decision making is informed by a variety of perspectives in order to deliver our ambitions.

These three amendments add to the strong foundations the Bill already provides for devolution, by going further to solve the specific issues that areas face. In that spirit, I can announce that we will shortly be consulting on how houses in multiple occupation are valued for council tax purposes. The consultation, to be launched by January, will look at situations where individual tenants can, in certain circumstances, be landed with their own council tax bill and will consider whether the valuation process needs to change. Our clear intention is for HMOs to be classed as single dwellings, other than in exceptional circumstances.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is important to look at the balance of council tax attributions for HMOs, but will the Minister confirm that any local authority that has such HMOs will have its council tax settlements adjusted, should a decision result in it making a net loss in such a situation?

Dehenna Davison: We will be consulting on this as a matter of urgency, and I am happy to take this away and to work with my hon. Friend to make sure we find a settled solution that works for local authorities.

If regulation is required, the measure will allow that regulation to be in place before the Bill receives Royal Assent. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt)

for their campaign highlighting this issue, which I know affects other MPs. The Secretary of State and I look forward to meeting their local businessman, Mr Brewer, in the coming days.

Separately, I can confirm that, during the Bill's passage in the other place, we intend to table amendments addressing circumstances in which authorities have to pay hope value when they compulsorily purchase land in an effort to regenerate their area.

Finally, we have also tabled amendments to make minor corrections and clarifications in support of high street rental auctions and compulsory purchase reforms. These amendments will ensure the policy objectives of these measures can be achieved in full.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. I thank her and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities team for listening so carefully to the concerns of Members on both sides of the House. What she says about new clause 7, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), is incredibly reassuring for people who are renting in HMOs. The ability to fine tune legislation is so precious.

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his incredibly kind words.

I thank Members on both sides of the House for the constructive way in which they have engaged with this important Bill. I look forward to hearing their contributions to today's debate, and I commend our amendments to the House.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition in these proceedings.

The Public Bill Committee had 27 sittings over four months. The Government enjoyed it so much that they sent seven Ministers and three Whips to share the joy of line-by-line scrutiny. Which was my favourite? How could I choose between those 27 glorious sittings? They were very good debates, as the Minister said.

When it comes to levelling up, we have been clear from the outset that we feel the Bill is a missed opportunity. It ought to have been a chance for the Government finally to set out what their levelling-up agenda really is and what it means for the country. It was a chance to turn the rhetoric and all the press releases into reality. Instead of translating three years of promises into genuinely transformative change, we do not feel the Bill takes as much further forward. After the White Paper and now this Bill, we are still searching for the big, bold change for which the country is crying out and that the Government promised. The Bill has squandered that opportunity, and it seems those premises will be broken.

Levelling up is supposedly the defining mission of this Government but, after all the talk and all the promises, all they could muster was bolting a few clauses on to the front of a planning Bill. It serves no one to pretend that that is not the reality. Where is the plan to tackle entrenched regional inequalities? Where is the plan to unleash the wasted potential of our nations and regions? And where is the plan to get power out of Whitehall and into our towns, villages and communities?

Part 1 of the Bill establishes the levelling-up missions and the rules for reporting progress made against them. The missions are an area of consensus. Who in this

House does not want to see a reduction in the disparities in healthy life expectancy, regional investment and educational outcomes? The problem is that, although the Government set out their supposed policy programme to deliver on these missions in their White Paper, it is in reality a mishmash of activity, much of which is already happening. We seek to improve this with amendment 10, as the missions should be accompanied by a full action plan setting out the activity taking place and how it will contribute to delivering the missions. I would hope that the Government already have such action plans, if levelling up really is such a totemic priority, but I fear they do not, because levelling up is not a priority.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned a couple of times the important question of levelling up across the country. Does he accept that, under the last Labour Government, one of the biggest challenges for many of us was that, although huge amounts of money were funnelled into metropolitan cities, smaller cities in counties around the country completely missed out? A huge amount of progressive work has been done by this Government to ensure that constituencies such as mine in Gloucester do not miss out on the levelling-up programme.

Alex Norris: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, when we talk about levelling up, it should never be north versus south or London versus the rest of the UK, and that it should recognise that, across all communities, there are challenges and areas that need support. I think that is an area of consensus.

I stress that the hon. Gentleman is talking about the previous Labour Government, not the last Labour Government. I was at secondary school for much of that period, and I am not sure that relitigating it would advance this debate. I do not see that huge progressive changes have come through in the intervening 12 years, as he sees it, and I do not see them on the horizon either. Conservative Members may disagree with me on this point, which is fine, but if the Government are so sure of their case that this Bill will be very impactful, where is the impact assessment? Its publication is long overdue, and the stream of Ministers who came through the Committee all promised to publish it. It was signed off by the Regulatory Policy Committee on 19 July—what is that, four months ago?—but instead, it is hidden. What on earth does it say that it needs to be locked away in the Department, and what does it say about the Government that they are not brave enough to publish it?

3 pm

We recognise that progress will not always be linear, and there will be times when reports—certainly the annual reports—into the missions may show a lack of progress or a need to operate differently. That will be challenging for the Government of the day, but it is an important part of the process, because that is how we will generate change. At the moment, however, the Bill states that these reports must be published within 120 days. There will be situations where the Government are not delivering on a mission and change is badly needed, but the report will be nearly a third of a year into the next year. We think that that is too late to generate meaningful change, so we seek with amendments 12 and 13 to

reduce that to 30 days. I cannot believe that that is not sufficient. Surely, the reports are developed during the year, and a month ought to be enough to finish them off.

This is another key point of difference, because the sad reality is that rather than learning and reacting year by year to ensure that progress is made, the Government have an alternative plan. When they fail, they will simply change the mission, the methodology or the metrics. As set out in clause 4, they want to mark their own homework. With this clause, they are saying the quiet part out loud: that they will not deliver on these aims, and when they do not, they will just change them. That will not do. This was a serious promise made to the British public, and it ought to be kept. That is why we think that, as set out in amendment 14, this entire clause should be deleted. That is mirrored in amendment 11, where we have sought to remove the Secretary of State's ability to discontinue a levelling-up mission. This is at best a ministerial convenience, but in reality a political crutch.

I listened carefully to the case made by the Minister—she is the Minister twice removed—for including these provisions, namely that unforeseeable events might mean that the Government of the day need such flexibility. I think that that is questionable, at best, but in the spirit of cross-party co-operation we have tabled amendment 64 as a compromise. That would mean that in genuinely unforeseen circumstances, Ministers could change the missions and their metrics, with the consent of a majority of this place and the other place. I would hope that that offers a happy medium. If the Government are not minded to accept the amendment, it tells us everything about the extent of their commitment to this agenda.

What we want the Government to do, and what they should want to do themselves, is to build confidence in their plans and their commitment to those plans, as set out in Amendment 8. Such Office for Budget Responsibility-style external, high-quality scrutiny would give the Government a real chance to demonstrate that their efforts are working and to help them change course where they are not. Similarly, amendment 15 would give this body the opportunity to comment on whether the levelling-up missions themselves are contributing to reducing geographical disparities. I think that that would be a real asset to the Government.

Resources are at the heart of the matter, and we want the Government to put to one side the rather bizarre spin that we saw at Monday's departmental questions and be honest about the resources available for levelling-up, as we have suggested in amendment 9. This matters more than ever, which brings me to new clause 41. The Government's inflation crisis is a serious risk to levelling-up as currently constituted and funded. The successful bids for round 1 of the levelling-up fund were announced more than a year ago, and the bids were designed a significant period of time before that. Clearly, much has changed since then. The previous Secretary of State confirmed to me in his single appearance at departmental questions that these bids can be downgraded to account for extra cost, and that is a serious concern. Local communities have entered into commitments in good faith, and expectations have been built up. They should not be hindered by the damage this Government have done to our economy; that is not good enough.

Similarly, round 2 bids were submitted before the Government drove the nation's finances into a ditch at the mini-Budget. Either those bids will be downgraded, or fewer of them will be successful. I asked the Minister on Monday during departmental questions which it would be, but I did not get an answer. We should get that answer today, or—even better—the Government should accept new clause 41.

Finally on part 1, we welcome new clause 84, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). Literacy really ought to be at the heart of all we do.

I move now to provisions, amendments and clauses relating to part 2. Part 2 establishes combined county authorities. We are supportive of structures that allow for the greater devolution of power and resources from Whitehall to town hall. We also agree that it is desirable for there to be alignment with combined authorities more generally. Our concern in Committee was that we believe that these bodies and entities should receive powers from the centre, rather than absorbing powers from councils. That is why we tabled amendment 17. In line with what the Minister has said and what was set out in Friday's written ministerial statement, we welcome Government amendment 29, which renders ours unnecessary. We are grateful that the Government have listened and moved on this point.

We do, however, want the establishment of CCAs to be as swift and painless as possible, and we have been told that Ministers intend to use guidance to ensure that that is the case. We think that that must happen promptly, and our amendment 18 calls for it to happen within six months. That is probably a reasonable timeframe, because we suspect that it has already been drafted. If that timeframe is not desirable, will the Minister at least say when she anticipates the production of the guidance?

I turn now to clause 58 and our amendment 19. The clause looks quite docile but is hugely significant. We have been told throughout proceedings that the purpose of part 2 of the Bill is for CCAs to mirror combined authorities, but this provision changes the rules governing combined authorities, and we do not think it has a place in the Bill. Currently, an elected Mayor can assume the police and crime commissioner role for their combined authority area if there is coterminosity and, crucially, if there is local agreement amongst constituent authorities. The clause changes that and states that the Mayor can assume these powers unilaterally. That is a significant and wholly unnecessary change.

In reality, virtually all combined authority Mayors either have PCC powers already, or cannot have PCC powers because of their boundaries. There is a tiny third category—indeed, I can only think of the one case in the West Midlands—where the Mayor does not have PCC powers but could do. The intention of the clause seems to be to change that. Eighteen months ago, the public voted for a Conservative Mayor and a Labour police and crime commissioner. That was their right, and their judgment must be respected. This clause allows Ministers to overreach and let the Mayor change that. That is unacceptable. I hope the Minister will reflect on that and delete the clause, which is an outlier in this Bill.

We are supportive of new clause 71, which is in the name of the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). It would mean that all areas, with or without a Mayor, could access tier 3 devolution

deals. The Opposition believe that all communities should have access to the maximum devolution of power and that governance arrangements should reflect local wishes. Currently, the Government will only give maximum powers if in return communities accept a Mayor, which is the Government's preferred model. We are proud of our country's Mayors. A significant number—I dare say a majority—are Labour and Co-operative ones, and they are very good indeed. We believe that those structures should reflect the choice of the local community, as set out in the new clause. I hope the Minister will look kindly on it.

Accordingly, we cannot support new clause 1, which will give the Secretary of State the unilateral right to impose a Mayor on local authorities that they deem to be failing. That would be an inversion of devolution, and we cannot support it.

I move on to parts 7, 8 and 9, to which we offered a significant number of amendments in Committee. In general terms, we are supportive of the provisions contained in part 7 concerning compulsory purchase. We believe that they are sensible and proportionate measures that will give local authorities clearer, more efficient and more effective powers; greater confidence that they can acquire land by compulsion to support regeneration schemes; and greater certainty that land can be assembled and schemes delivered quickly through compulsory purchase.

We also supported the Government new clause tabled in Committee concerning compensation in relation to hope value, on the grounds that it would help to expedite development in cases where a certificate of appropriate alternative development is unlikely to be awarded, and it would make many more such developments financially viable. We are grateful to have heard from the Minister in her opening remarks about where the Government might go next with that. We do not feel that there is a pressing need for the statutory review of the powers proposed in new clause 34, but we take no issue with new clause 66, which represents a sensible consolidation and modernisation of compulsory purchase law along the lines suggested by the Law Commission.

On part 8, we are very pleased to see the Government bring forward proposals for high street rental auctions. Sites that lie vacant on our high streets pull the area down. We need to get these sites into use, and rental auctions are a good way to do so. In Committee, we felt that there were too many loopholes in this process, so we are pleased to see and support Government amendments 40 to 44, which tighten matters. In reality, we want to go much further. We want a proper community right to buy important assets, high street or otherwise. It was disappointing that the Government rejected it in Committee, but the next Labour Government will correct that. More generally, it is regrettable that the Bill does not say more about community power, and that the Government have resisted all our efforts to insert community power provisions into the Bill. We may need a general election before we can resolve that.

On part 9, if we are to have effective use of land across all communities, we need to know who owns it so that they can be supported to use it. In extremis, we can use powers under parts 7 and 8. In Committee, we put a number of questions to Ministers that we do not think

have quite been addressed yet. We hope that they will be answered in closing, but in broad terms we support the provision.

Finally, I turn to clause 190, relating to the Government's proposed reintroduction of the Vagrancy Act 1824, notwithstanding Parliament's repeal of the Act during proceedings on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Even by the low standards set by this Government this was a particularly shoddy affair. Putting aside the blatant disregard for this place, it shows a genuine lack of humanity and care for the most vulnerable. We are very pleased to see that efforts on both sides of the Chamber—I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) in this regard—have borne fruit and that the Government now seek to remove this provision with Government amendment 1, which of course we support. But I hope that the Secretary of State does not seek credit in having belatedly supported this amendment given that this is his own Bill—his own provision. Similarly, we debated this in Committee only five weeks ago and at that point the Minister defended its inclusion; what does that say about the Government's judgment in this matter?

I have one final question for the Minister. Thursday's business statement programmed in next Monday for the second part of remaining stages on this Bill. There are not many well-kept secrets in Westminster and it is not a well-kept secret that that is not going to happen. Surely the Government are not running scared of their own Back Benchers on this; what is going on? Can we have clarity from the Minister that the Bill is coming back next week, because these are important provisions. The Minister says that if they are held up, it will affect the roll-out of devolution, which will be very bad. I hope we will get some clarity that the Government will step up and deliver on the promises they have made.

This Bill is a missed opportunity. Today, as in Committee, we have sought to help the Government improve it. I fear once again for our prospects in this regard, but that is because this Government are interested in the politics of levelling up, not the delivery of it for all of our nations and regions. This Government will never level up, and they should get out of the way for one who will.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I rise to set out the case for new clauses 70 and 71 in my name with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) as well as numerous other Members from all parts of the House, including several Liberal Democrats, among them its leader, about which I will say a little more later.

I was very pleased that the Chancellor made direct reference to Cornwall in the context of the next round of devolution deals in his autumn statement last week, but linked to the agreement is a more controversial decision about whether Cornwall should have a directly elected leader, or mayor. I can see both sides of the argument and am genuinely agnostic. On the one hand, having a directly elected mayor could create, in one individual, a powerful voice for Cornwall; it could strengthen the accountability to local people in a more direct way, rather than have a model that relies heavily on a council chief executive. On the other side of the argument, however, the idea of a single individual representing the whole of Cornwall unsettles some of

[George Eustice]

our Cornish sensibilities. We have a motto in Cornwall, “One and all”, but can this Cornish mindset based around the idea of shared endeavour be properly represented in a “One for all” system of democratic accountability? In addition, if we were to have lots of councillors from one party but a directly elected leader from another, or indeed from no party at all, would that create tensions and undermine good governance? This is therefore a significant decision for our councillors in Cornwall, and it is essential that all parties allow their councillors a free vote on the issue so that the advantages and disadvantages can be debated openly ahead of a final collective decision.

My contention today is that, whatever Cornwall eventually decides to do by way of structure of governance, it should nevertheless be granted an ambitious tier 3 devolution agreement. If having a mayoral system is such a powerful idea, it will carry the day irrespective of whether the Government dangle new money and new powers as an incentive. If it turns out not to be a good idea, however, the problems created might be more expensive than the perceived benefits of the deal.

I know that the Government seek to bring more clarity and consistency to local government structure, and I completely understand, for what we have now is something of a hotchpotch. But there are powerful reasons, rooted in centuries of history, for treating Cornwall as a special case, for Cornwall has a distinct and subtly different place within the British constitution. The nature and origins of this Cornish particularism are often misunderstood and sometimes even mocked by people “up country,” as we say, who do not know what they are talking about, but Cornwall is different. It has a highly Unionist tendency, sealed through the Crown down the centuries. Its geography as a peninsula gives it a self-reliance, and with that a resilience. Cornwall can occasionally be somewhat aloof, but it is only ever hostile to other parts of the country when deliberately provoked. It is eternally proud of its distinctiveness.

3.15 pm

Historically, during Anglo-Saxon times, Cornwall was named “West Wales” and the links with Wales go back a long way. As we were recently reminded after the passing of Her late Majesty the Queen, it is also a constitutional rule that the eldest son of the monarch automatically assumes the title of Duke of Cornwall, and that has been the case down the ages. While there has been a more recent convention that future kings should first become Prince of Wales, it has always been more than a convention—it has been a constitutional rule—that future kings must first be the Duke of Cornwall.

In addition, the Duchy of Cornwall performs some of the functions that elsewhere fall to the Crown Estate. Until the 1700s there was a Cornish Stannary Parliament that had the power to veto certain English tax laws in Cornwall as part of a constitutional settlement to accommodate tin mining interests. Indeed, an attempt to disregard that settlement led to the Cornish rebellion of 1497. Finally, Cornwall was the only Royalist enclave in the south-west during the civil war and, had the Royalists won, it is likely that Cornwall would have been granted an administrative status similar to that of Wales.

The Kilbrandon report in the early 1970s acknowledged the distinctiveness of Cornwall and its unique status within our constitution, and suggested that it should be regarded as a duchy rather than just a normal county of England. A decade ago, this unique constitutional position was given modern expression when the coalition Government gave Cornwall special recognition, with the Cornish being acknowledged as a national minority under the European framework convention, alongside the Welsh, the Irish and the Scottish. In the best Cornish tradition, securing this recognition was a team effort, with cross-party support both within the council in Cornwall and here in this House. In those days, half the Cornish MPs were Conservative and the other half Lib Dem, and for once we agreed. As I mentioned at the start of my speech, I am grateful for the support that the Liberal Democrats have given these amendments, and let me take this opportunity to acknowledge the work that their party did at the time to secure that recognition. In particular, I remember that the former Liberal Democrat MP Dan Rogerson campaigned on the issue for several years.

My amendments draw on that recognition given a decade ago. New clause 70 states that, when making decisions about devolution deals, the Government must give special consideration to areas that contain a national minority covered by the framework convention. New clause 71 goes further and would require the Government to provide for regulations to grant a tier 3 devolution deal to areas covered by that framework convention.

Accepting these amendments would enable the Government to demonstrate that they take their commitments to the framework convention seriously. It would, of course, make Cornwall a special and unique case, which the Minister’s officials might consider untidy, but it was ever thus; throughout history Cornwall has had a unique place within the British constitution, and it is only right that this Cornish exceptionalism should continue. I therefore commend these two new clauses to the House.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Because so much of the Bill focuses on England only, I will concentrate my remarks on amendment 14. The fact that this amendment has to be tabled at all shows that the Government cannot, and do not expect to, meet their own expectations raised in the Bill. There is nothing more dangerous than raising expectations that will not be met.

This is not just a Bill in the usual sense; levelling up is not a run-of-the-mill promise that can easily be broken and forgotten. According to the Government, the very concept of levelling up is a flagship policy—a policy designed to change the face of the UK, genuinely to seek to spread prosperity and opportunity, and to make our communities better right across the board. Anyone who has such expectations based on what the Government have said about the Bill and its aims will, I fear, be disappointed. The very fact that amendment 14 exists illustrates that they will be disappointed. It is not credible that a Government so in love with austerity can be trusted to level up in any meaningful and sustainable way. Growth in the UK has been fatally undermined by both incompetence and Brexit. That is why amendment 14 matters and why we in the SNP support it.

In the absence of growth and grown-up and frank conversations about the damage of Brexit, we have instead vague missions, with no real plans for delivery—missions that are, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, of dubious quality. Yet still the Government have reserved to themselves the power to change the goalposts. That demonstrates that the Government are not even clear about how they will measure the success or the progress of the very missions that they have set themselves.

An annual report can apparently make everything all right, but it simply will not be enough to keep the Government on track to achieve their objectives. There is also a lack of ownership and accountability for each of the 12 levelling-up missions by individual Government Departments. None of this is news to the Government, of course, which is why they have retained that authority to move the goalposts and change their own targets if they are not going to be met. This is like someone marking their own homework and reserving the right to change the pass mark of the test that they have set themselves. That does not sound like a Government who are confident about their own delivery, even though we are talking about a flagship policy.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does the hon. Lady honestly think that there is something fundamentally wrong in a Government Department saying that it will have measures and targets, that it will review, and that it may recalibrate and tweak in order to reflect circumstances over a period of time? Governments do not straitjacket themselves. There has to be flexibility, particularly when taxpayers' money is being deployed.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is not about flexibility; it is about credibility. There is nothing wrong with the aims as articulated by the UK Government, but a Government cannot set themselves a task, call it a flagship policy and then reserve the right to move the goalposts as and when they fail to make progress. That is an important point.

The hon. Gentleman brings me to another very important matter. On the delivery of levelling up, what of the bids that were announced as being successful this time last year? We are in a different situation now, because the costs of labour and resources are being impacted by inflationary pressures. With regard to infrastructure projects, for example, road stone inflation is currently running at around 35%. This means that, in order to continue to support the levelling-up projects to which they have committed funds, the UK Government must increase the awards already made to take account of inflation, or councils must make up the difference because of the impact of inflation, which is difficult as council resources are already very stretched, or projects that were envisaged and costed last year are significantly scaled back. If it is the latter, that is very serious, because even successful levelling-up bids cannot have the impact that was first envisaged when the bids were made and approved. It is a mess.

There is also a significant impact on projects currently awaiting approval as they will be similarly hit with soaring inflation. I am very keen to find out how this will be dealt with. If this is not taken into account, bids already approved are hamstrung and cannot have the

impact envisaged, which means that levelling up, as set out in the Bill, will amount to even less than it did before, with its vague missions and moving goalposts. It is no wonder that the Government want the ability to move the goalposts.

How ironic that, after more than a decade of Tory misrule and austerity, the UK is in a worse position than it should be, facing the worst downturn of any advanced economy in the world. No eurozone country is expected to decline as much as the UK, and, as a whole, the eurozone is expected to grow—so much for levelling up. In this context, marking their own homework and permitting changes to the mission, progress and methodology start to make the Government look more than a little suspicious. They could, of course, support amendment 14 and put all those suspicions to bed.

We are supposed to be persuaded simply by the mere passing of a Bill, vague and lacking in credibility as it is, that this Government can and will deliver levelling up. It is almost Orwellian. At the very point that we have a weakened economy, crumbling exports, rising food prices, rising energy prices, challenges with our fuel supply, and with the Government's own forecasts predicting worse to come, the Secretary of State has the power to change the mission and progress of levelling up. That does not look like a Government who are confident and certain that they will actually deliver the meaningful levelling up that they say they want to deliver. However, if they support amendment 14, they could commit themselves in a way that would be far more credible.

Nickie Aiken: In the time available to me today, I will cover two amendments to the Bill, both of which I originally tabled. One has been taken on by the Secretary of State, for which I am incredibly grateful.

First, new clause 4, which stands in my name, is a technical amendment. My constituency covers two local government areas: the City of Westminster and the City of London. Both are subject to the rules governing the participation of councillors in formal discussion or in voting on matters where they have a pecuniary interest, as per the Localism Act 2011. The rules apply to Westminster and the City of London, but in the City, uniquely, there is an additional provision, contained in what is now section 618 of the Housing Act 1985, that bans councillors outright from discussing or voting on such matters. Contravening this ban constitutes a criminal offence.

The history of these provisions has been examined by the City's officials, but their origin remains unexplained. These provisions have simply been repeated without comment in successive consolidations of housing legislation over the past 30 years. Members may ask why I have tabled this amendment. I do so because I believe, as I am sure everyone in this place does, that local people should be represented at council decision-making meetings, such as planning committees, when an application within a ward is being heard. As things stand, if there is a planning application that affects, say, the Barbican or Golden Lane estates in the City, a local councillor who represents Aldersgate or Cripplegate but who lives on one of those estates cannot speak at committee. To do so could lead to their being prosecuted. That is outdated and in fact outrageous.

By removing the punitive provisions in subsections 618(3) and (4) of the 1985 Act, my amendment corrects that anomaly and allows members of the Court of Common

[*Nickie Aiken*]

Council in the City of London to represent their residents, as every other councillor in the country does. This is a matter of equality of treatment, with which I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will agree.

Secondly, I want to touch on Government amendment 1. The case for repealing the Vagrancy Act 1824 was made in this Chamber during debate on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. From conversations I have had with both the Metropolitan Police and the City of London Police, I believe alternative powers to deal with aggressive begging are already available and are being used, as we would expect. We have those powers from the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, so it should be no surprise that arrests and prosecutions under the Vagrancy Act have plummeted since 2014.

3.30 pm

In practice, we have not seen a sudden crime wave as a result of repealing the Vagrancy Act, but we have seen many lives extended and improved. That feels very much in keeping with the aims of the Government's levelling-up agenda. We must support those on the street to turn their lives around, not criminalise them. I thank the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), for the time he has given me to discuss this amendment, and I am grateful that the Government have now accepted my arguments and taken on my amendment as their own.

To conclude, I welcome the Bill. It sets out to achieve a lot, and I believe it will benefit from amendments made today. I look forward to seeing its progression in the other place and its final stages in due course.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I will focus my remarks on new clause 84, tabled in my name. I thank colleagues who have put their names to it.

New clause 84 would require the Government to include reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy as one of their levelling-up missions. Additionally, it would require them, during each mission period, to review levels of adult literacy in the UK, to publish the findings of that review and to set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK. I believe that that is vital.

Poor literacy skills and illiteracy often consign people to insecure and low-paid work. They are a form of deprivation that can lead to isolation and poverty and can leave people vulnerable to exploitation. They can also impact on their children, as people with very low literacy skills often lack the confidence and ability to read to their children when they are young or assist them with their homework when they are older. That compounds the problem and means that a whole cohort of children are disadvantaged due to a lack of support at home in learning to enjoy reading. Very low literacy levels also leave people unable to fulfil their potential in other ways, such as navigating opportunities for travel, training, housing, leisure or work.

It is quite remarkable that the most recent national survey of adult basic skills in England was the 2011 skills for life survey, commissioned by the previous Labour Government. The survey interviewed more than 7,200 adults

aged 16-65 in England and assessed their literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology skills. Their skills were assessed against the five lowest national qualification framework levels, which are entry levels 1 to 3 and levels 1 and 2.

As a guide, entry level 1 is equivalent to the expected level of attainment for pupils aged 5 to 6; entry level 2 to that for ages 7 to 9 and entry level 3 to that for ages 9 to 11. Adults with literacy skills at entry level 3 or below are deemed to be functionally illiterate. The survey found that in 2011 5.1 million adults, or 14.9% of the adult population, had literacy levels at entry level 3 or below, meaning that they were functionally illiterate.

The survey looked at differences between the regions in England and found that rates of functional illiteracy varied considerably. The highest levels were in London at 28% and the lowest were in the rest of the south-east and the south-west at 9%. Those figures demonstrate clear disparities among the regions, although one reason thought to be behind the high figure for London was the much higher proportion of adults living there for whom English is not their first spoken language.

However, analysis of only those adults with English as a first language shows that their rates of functional illiteracy were still highest in London and the north-east, both at 17%. Meanwhile, in the south-east, they were almost half that level at 9% and in the south-west 8%, while the national average was 12%. Those are the findings of the 2011 survey.

In 2022, according to the National Literacy Trust, 7.1 million adults in England can be described as functionally illiterate—so clearly things have got worse, not better. Such people can understand accurately and independently short, straightforward text on familiar topics, and obtain information from everyday sources, but reading information from unfamiliar sources or topics could cause problems.

Those 7.1 million adults represent 16.4%—or one in six—of the adult population in England. In Scotland, one in four adults experiences challenges because of a lack of literacy skills; in Northern Ireland, one in five adults has poor literacy skills; and in Wales, one in eight adults lacks basic literacy skills. That represents a crisis, and one that requires immediate attention from the Government. It is shameful that there has been no follow-up by the Government to the 2011 skills for life survey, which was commissioned by the last Labour Government. Why has there been no survey since?

We are considering levelling up, so it is important to understand that there are also regional disparities in the take-up of adult education in general. Nesta noted in its 2020 report, "Education for all: making the case for a fairer adult learning system":

"There are major differences in the rates of participation in adult learning in different parts of the UK".

According to its analysis,

"the South West and London stood out from the other regions, reporting higher participation levels of about 16 per cent. In contrast, Northern Ireland reported participation of around 10 per cent,"

and participation was also low in the north-east of England. It also found huge differences in participation within individual regions. For instance, the analysis showed that London had the greatest variation in participation of any region; the participation of adults in the west and north-west of outer London was 18%, compared with just 12% in the east of inner London.

Stephen Evans, the chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute, recently said that

“We need to level up lifelong learning”

and that

“we’re limiting people’s opportunities based on who they are and where they’re from. We’ve got to change that.”

I think he is absolutely right, and I hope the Minister takes note. Improving levels of adult literacy is important not only for empowering individuals to make the most of their lives, but for the economy, too. The millions of people who struggle to read and write undoubtedly make up a large proportion of those furthest away from the labour market.

As the WEA has noted, employers say that they value essential skills such as communication, teamwork and creative thinking, as well as the foundation of literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The CBI says that over 90% of the workforce will need to retrain by 2030. Clearly, those who struggle to read and write must be a priority for the Government if we are to improve productivity and address inequality.

Organisations such as the Good Things Foundation do important work on digital literacy and supporting people in need. Digital literacy skills are very important and have become more so as the world of work and methods of communication have changed drastically in recent years. However, people need literacy skills to acquire digital literacy, so we need action from the Government. It is notable that the Government introduced a £560 million adult numeracy programme last year, but there was nothing for literacy. Why? It is an essential skill for life in the 21st century. The Institute for Fiscal Studies cited a 50% fall in spending on classroom-based adult education between 2010-11 and 2020-21. That represents a massive cut in the provision of community-based adult learning opportunities, which are crucial for the delivery of adult literacy.

Addressing the crisis in adult literacy is a matter of real urgency if we are to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their potential and if we are to address the economic challenges that our country faces. It makes absolutely no sense for the Government to continue ignoring this crisis. There can be no levelling up in the UK without a focused and well-resourced response to the crisis in adult literacy. I call on Members across the House to support new clause 84.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is nice to be called near the beginning of a debate, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am grateful that I have managed to catch your eye—perhaps it is because I have put a tie on today. I am also grateful for the chance to speak on Report, as I sat on the Bill Committee in its latter stages, but for only five of the many, many sessions that the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) mentioned, so I experienced only a fraction of the joy that he did.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak given my interest both in this place and as the leader of a council that is directly involved in devolution negotiations. Indeed, they are probably some of the more advanced negotiations and, to proceed, they require the Bill to pass. I thank the Minister for her response on a number of technical points in recent days and weeks, and for her commitment to this agenda, which I know she is passionate about.

The amendments focus largely on devolution in combined authorities. As I have repeated, I am frustrated that the planning parts are even in the Bill. It started as a Levelling-Up Bill, but planning was added to it later and has complicated it and made it difficult and controversial. Those could have been two separate things. We could have flown through this very quickly. I know it is before the Minister’s time, so I do not expect her to account for that, but the Bill could have been far simpler than it now is. The timing of all this is vital for the delivery of some of these combined authorities. If the Bill is delayed, it will delay the timeline for the delivery of these outcomes that we all seek, so it is important that the Bill is allowed to progress quickly.

Since my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) said some 18 months ago that these deals would be a key driver for levelling up, progress has been positive. Mansfield is often at the wrong end of many tables that would put it front and centre of the levelling-up agenda, so we wanted to be at the front of the queue for new powers and new funds. We are currently consulting on a new devolution deal, worth £1.14 billion initially in additional gainshare funding into our region, plus powers over transport, skills and economic development.

Huge opportunities for us stem from this Bill and from other existing growth projects across the region, whether that is our freeport, our development company, which is also formalising and given its powers through this Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, integrated rail plan projects or spherical tokamak for energy production—STEP fusion—which was recently announced for north Nottinghamshire. When painting out this opportunity for business clubs, residents and education providers recently, I have used the STEP fusion example. It is a £20 billion project with investment from the Government and the UK Atomic Energy Authority that could put us front and centre of clean energy for the world in 20 or 30 years’ time. It is a huge, long-term project, and what devolution gives us—I would like to think this is part of why our area was attractive for the bid—is the ability not only to have a prototype power plant in the future, but to create the skills environment and training opportunities around it, working with our colleges and universities so that local children can take up those courses and move into that space. That way, rather than just importing nuclear scientists from other parts of the world, young people in places such as Mansfield are given the opportunity to build and create.

The deal also means we will have the power to fill in the gaps in our transport system and ensure local people can easily access those opportunities and get to and from those jobs. That is game changing. There will be kids in my constituency who, in 20 years’ time, will work not just in nuclear science but in its supply chain who could never have dreamed of those opportunities on their doorstep even just a few months ago. The power of this deal and these opportunities is incredibly meaningful. Finally, the east midlands can be in the premier league alongside other regional partners; I hope we will do a bit better than Forest so far, although things are picking up. The project is a huge opportunity.

I welcome new clauses 61 and 62, which enhance the powers of Mayors over that key route network. Members will not be surprised by this if they have campaigned in elections, particularly local elections, but highways are

[Ben Bradley]

always at the top of residents' list. They are probably the one service, particularly at upper-tier, county level, that everybody uses and experiences, so they are always top of the list. More power and opportunity to engage in this space and work with National Highways on a wider range of networks and to do that more closely and in a more joined-up way is beneficial. I also look forward to the negotiations for our region around this transport pot and investment that is part of our deal and is yet to come.

I am afraid I cannot support new clause 71 tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). I appreciate that he was making a particular case for his area, and he was right to do so; we all do the same thing. But one benefit of devolution—the Government have said that every area across the country will have the right to access this opportunity—is the chance to have some clarity and consistency within a structure that is currently incredibly complicated. I speak for an area that has, arguably, three tiers of local government. We see a combined authority as an opportunity to make coherent sense of that and to pull us into a structure that allows us to have shared strategies.

Other areas might take a different view, but it is not inconsistent or unrealistic to say that if someone wants the same powers as the west midlands, for example, they should have the same accountable structure as the west midlands. That will allow Government to have a consistent relationship with each region and each part of the country with those regional Mayors. That is my personal view from my experience of that engagement. If, having devolved powers, built structures and offered everyone that chance, we end up with a more complicated structure with different systems across the country, that would be a bad thing.

George Eustice: I agree it is good to have that consistency in England, but the amendment is specifically about Cornwall, which has a unique constitutional place within our family of nations.

Ben Bradley: My right hon. Friend knows Cornwall better than I do; I know it only as a holiday destination. I leave him to make the case for his particular place. I am sure that the Government will engage with him in that conversation. However, consistency is an important outcome from these proposals.

A number of amendments appear to duplicate things that are already happening around the country and in government. For example, new clause 46 speaks to a review of business rates, which I hope and trust the Government are already looking at. The Treasury review concluded last year and set out a five-year road map on that, but I hope the Government will take it further.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): High streets and market towns in constituencies such as mine are really struggling. Local residents are shopping less because of the cost of living crisis and businesses cannot compete with online retailers because of business rates, so I am surprised that the Government are not supporting new clause 46. After all, one of their 2019 manifesto commitments was to review business rates in order to

come up with a better model that can allow our high streets to thrive and help to level up regions where market towns are struggling.

3.45 pm

Ben Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady's premise; I have made the same case to Government myself. I simply point out that last year's Treasury report, which I was reading this morning, which laid out the conclusions of an initial review of business rates, set out a five-year timetable for change. It is not as powerful or as fast as I would like, but that review has already begun and therefore new clause 46 appears to duplicate action where it is already happening.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), new clause 84 seeks to get adult literacy written into levelling-up missions, but, as far as I can see, that is largely already there. The missions already speak to more people achieving basic standards of reading and writing, as well as improving skills, while one of the key strands of the devolved settlements is adult skills. It is fantastic that that is passed down to a regional level, giving us the opportunity to have far more clout and say over how such skills are delivered, so I think adult skills, such as numeracy and literacy, are at the forefront of the Bill as it stands.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the hon. Gentleman therefore be supporting new clause 84?

Ben Bradley: As I just said, as far as I can see, the provision is already there and therefore the new clause is unnecessary. Our conversations about devolution within the region have revolved massively around adult skills. In the future, I would like to see Government further devolve powers in related areas, particularly around provision delivered by such organisations as the Department for Work and Pensions, so that there will be a chance to engage in employability conversations and boost basic skills. I look forward to conversations about that in the future.

From conversations with officials and Ministers, it is clear that once we have the framework and structure, we can come back and talk about new things we would like to see devolved down to our region. That is an example of an area where Whitehall struggles to join things up and where such matters can fall through the gaps in a siloed system. One of my favourite examples of that is youth work, which sits across about six Departments so a joined-up strategy is difficult to achieve. If we can devolve such matters to a regional level, we will be able to share budgets and strategies and do things more effectively. I hope we will be able to have those conversations with Government in the future.

My final point is about flexibility in local budgets. I had the honour of hosting the local government Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), in Nottinghamshire a few weeks ago. We went into great detail about the council budget, the opportunities and risks of it, and some of the things that could be done that do not cost the Government any money. In the spirit of empowering local leaders and devolving powers to local areas, it is key to give them more flexibility over existing budgets.

If I had the same budget in my local authority but all the rules and ringfences about what I could spend it on were removed, I would have a surplus and I would not

have a problem. The lack of flexibility in the system means that I can spend the budget only on certain things that are not always the priority. There is a good opportunity, whether in the upcoming local government settlement or in the 2023 devolution deals and beyond, to genuinely empower local council leaders to be able to take decisions on funding key priorities.

I will point to one example. In common with many people, I have a bus service improvement fund in Nottinghamshire County Council that allows me to build bus lanes. At the same time, I have a shortfall in the funding that I need to keep the buses running. I could end up in a scenario where I have to build bus lanes, but I have no buses to run in them, even though the money is already in my bank account and if I were allowed to do so, I could spend it on keeping the buses. That is just one example, and there are many more. Flexibility and empowerment of local councils and leaders is hugely important. I am pleased that the Government have committed to that through devolution, but there is more that could be done to support the sustainability of local councils too.

In conclusion, the timescales of the Bill are hugely important. It needs to be completed on time in the spring or early summer if we are to pass statutory instruments and stick to timetables and targets for elections in 2024. I urge the Government to push the Bill through and ensure that we meet those timescales, otherwise my region will be stranded: the deal will be done, the structures will be in place and everything will be ready to go, but we will have to wait another year for another set of elections. That seems arbitrary and would be incredibly frustrating. We are at the front of the queue and we just want to be let in the door. I trust that the Government will recognise the importance of delivering on those commitments. I look forward, of course, to speaking to the Minister in due course about the success of Mansfield's levelling-up fund bid—she may hear that from a few hon. Members in this debate—so there are many conversations still to have.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate and to have heard the contributions so far, and an even greater pleasure to have been involved in all but two of the 27 Committee sittings—I missed them for the Westmorland county show, which is permissible in my opinion. I confess that I have not sat on a Committee for many years and I genuinely enjoyed it, which may be a peculiar thing to say. I enjoyed the civility of it, the way that we could go through the Bill line by line, and the fact that we could disagree—we disagreed pretty much politely throughout.

As has been observed by other hon. Members, the turnover of the ministerial team was rather like Mark E Smith's *The Fall*—the Secretary of State was Mark E Smith in that characterisation, although even Mark E Smith never managed to sack himself. The turnover was remarkable, but all the Ministers were pleasant and well engaged, so I enjoyed the process.

The Bill is complex—there is a lot of it and a lot of detail—but I would argue that some of it is totally unnecessary, because levelling up the country needs not legislation but will. The phrase “levelling up” recognises that some regions of the United Kingdom, particularly in England, are behind others. Generally speaking, only London and the south-east tend to make a positive net contribution to GDP. The eastern region's contribution

is occasionally fractionally positive, but the rest of us technically make a negative contribution. That is not our fault; it is because of the way this country operates as a unipolar country, where all the resources are centred on London and its environs.

There is absolutely a need to level up, in the phrase that the Government have chosen, but the action seems starkly missing. Let us be honest: as we go through the process of public services and public spending cuts now, there is no doubt that the poorest regions of the country that are most in need of levelling up will, as always, be hardest hit, because those are the communities in which people most need public services. In my view, therefore, much of the Bill—for all that it has been a joy to discuss—is navel contemplation over action.

The part of the Bill that we are discussing that relates to devolution and the settlements and deals for local communities is thoroughly patronising. We are not actually being offered devolution at all, are we? We are being offered delegation. I am pleased to support new clause 71 in the name of the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), whose kind words about my former and current colleagues are genuinely well received and I am grateful on their and my behalf. He talked about the importance of Cornwall being able to choose its own destiny, which I fully support and which, surely, is what we want for everywhere else as well if we believe in devolution and empowering local communities.

The various Ministers who we spoke to in Committee consistently reinforced the position that level 3, the highest tier of devolution, will be available only to those communities that choose a Mayor. That is not devolution but delegation to neaten up the system for the benefit of the Government rather than to empower local communities. If rural and diverse communities such as Cumbria, which is not dissimilar to Cornwall, decide that they want devolution, but do not want to choose the model the Government tell them to have, who the heck are the Conservative Government in Westminster to dictate either to Cornwall or Cumbria that it must have such a system? We would like devolution—we demand devolution—and we demand not to be told the format that it must take. An obsession with symmetry is typical of all parties that end up in office—sometimes.

Ben Bradley: Does the hon. Member not accept that, if we allow every area to dictate the way it has devolution in the way it would like to have it, we would end up with a ridiculous hotchpotch of systems across the country that makes no coherent sense? Our system of local government and local governance is already incredibly mixed and complicated, and surely this is a chance to have some consistency across the board so that his area, just like my area, can have a positive and consistent relationship with Government and equal access to Government.

Tim Farron: I see the point, and I understand that the hon. Gentleman is a local government leader himself. Nevertheless, that is what people would say if they were sitting in Westminster, because it is neat and useful for them. The reality is that, in Cumbria, Cornwall, Northumberland or Shropshire, having the ability to choose our own style of government might be complicated for the Government, but it is not complicated for us. Do we believe in devolution, or do we want the Government to have things just as they want?

[*Tim Farron*]

I feel—I fear, even—that what we are seeing is not devolution, but delegation. The Government are seeking neatness and convenience for their own sake, rather than the empowerment of communities. It is an obsession with symmetry, rather than the empowerment of such communities. With the exception of the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth and perhaps one or two others, the Government are playing to their stereotype of being out of touch with local communities. So, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me, I will play to my stereotype and talk about electoral reform. You would be very disappointed if I did not.

New clause 45 offers local authorities the opportunity to choose their own electoral system. Unsurprisingly—I will absolutely stagger you now, Mr Deputy Speaker, and predict this—a commitment to electoral reform will be in the next Liberal Democrat manifesto. There, I have said it. The point is that communities should be allowed to choose, and since the last election the Government have removed the ability to use the supplementary vote—not an electoral system I favour, but nevertheless one fairer than first past the post—for mayoral elections and police and crime commissioner elections, which I think removes choice from local communities.

I would also suggest this in support of my amendment. The Government choosing to make a change to the electoral system, as they have done in local government, without reference to a referendum is an interesting precedent for what might happen under a future Government. It is a precedent the Government will wish they had never set, because if a party or parties go into a future election committing to electoral reform in their manifestos and find itself or themselves in government, we now have the precedent that electoral reform can be delivered without reference to a referendum. The Government will rue the day, and they might rue it soon.

New clause 45 gives local authorities the opportunity to choose to elect their mayors, councillors and police and crime commissioners in the way they choose. If this really was a levelling-up and devolution Bill, of course the Government would permit local authorities to do that. They do not need to approve of what a local government area does, within obvious parameters, to be able to permit them to have that power.

I want to move on to new clause 46, in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), which, with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will seek to push to a vote. It is on the reform of the business rates system, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) has already rightly and powerfully made reference. Business rates are an outdated and completely counterproductive system of taxation. They are harmful for our high streets and the economy because they directly tax investment in structures and equipment, rather than taxing profits or the fixed stock of land.

The 2019 Conservative manifesto committed to doing exactly what I am suggesting and proposing that the Government should do, so they should have no problem whatsoever in adopting new clause 46. It should be a piece of cake for them to do so, because in their manifesto they pledged to

“cut the burden of tax on business by reducing business rates. This will be done via a fundamental review of the system.”

Where is it? My amendment gives them the opportunity to do just that. This is the opportunity for them to show that they meant what they had in their manifesto.

Since the 2019 election, the Government have repeatedly tinkered with business rates but failed to bring forward that fundamental review. We often approve of that tinkering, but the fact that they are constantly tinkering is a living admission that the system is broken, so let us fix it. The fact is, business rates do not reflect the value of properties, particularly in the north and the midlands—areas outside of London and the south-east—and do active damage to our high streets, which are already under enough pressure.

4 pm

We see the move towards online shopping and the pressure of the economic downturn with people having less money in their pockets, so our high streets—our town and village centres—are under enormous pressure. Business rates actively suppress entrepreneurial spirit. For many businesses in my community—in Westmorland and in towns such as Kendal—and in towns further afield such as Appleby, Kirkby Stephen, Sedburgh, Windermere, Ambleside and Grange, the use of town centre premises would be a valuable addition to what they do, and yet they stay out of town and village centres because business rates keep them out. Reform is essential. There is demand from many businesses to have a town or village centre presence, yet business rates put them off. Why do the Government not carry out their manifesto promise? Adopting new clause 46 would give them the opportunity to do just that.

We have had references to the Vagrancy Act 1824. I am pleased to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who is no longer in her place, and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and others on both sides of the House who pushed the Government into this position. In Committee just a few weeks ago, the Government were defending what was in effect the reintroduction of that Act, despite it being totally counterproductive and utterly immoral. That is the one amendment from outside the Government ranks that, so far, they have chosen to accept. Credit to them at least for having done that in the end.

A major issue for us all and the big question hanging over the debate—it was referred to by the official Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—is: what about Monday? Will the Bill continue this side of Christmas, and on what basis will it do so? I confess that, unlike many members of Bill Committees, I wanted to be on the Committee. I knocked on the door and volunteered because I saw the opportunities, particularly in the planning part of the Bill, to do great good for communities such as mine by addressing the planning issues, excessive second home ownership, the evisceration of the long-term private rented market by Airbnb and the loss of many rural services. I thought that even if the Bill did not solve those issues—it did not and does not—it nevertheless provided a structure for us to table amendments that could solve those problems, and yet here we are, waiting. I do not think that it is fair. The Government are showing weakness and indecision. We have already had enough delay and enough ministerial changeovers. Let us get on with it and consider these issues so that we can make a difference.

The Rural Services Network, using the Government's own metrics, assessed the regions of England and rural England as a separate entity, and it worked out that rural England is the poorest region of England. The Bill is the opportunity to tackle some of the problems that I have mentioned. The fact that we are in doubt about whether that will happen is deeply concerning.

I have one more comment to make before I conclude. The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) talked about buses and some of the nonsense that affects us. I am with him on that. The lack of investment in rural public transport, and bus services in particular, is debilitating to communities such as mine. However, it would appear that there is a set of cloth ears in the Department, the Treasury and the Department for Transport when it comes to how money is allocated. Cumbria bid for Bus Back Better money—good for us—but we got nothing out of it. Nothing at all. One reason why was that a key criterion that the Department for Transport sought to ensure councils fulfilled in using that money was building bus lanes. Mr Deputy Speaker, you know my constituency, and in Little Langdale there ain't no space for a bus lane—there is barely space for a lane. The idea that that was where public money was to go shows that we have a Government who take rural areas for granted and do not listen to the people who live in them. My great fear is that levelling up is a phrase, not a policy. It is not landing in the communities I represent or in those of many others. This is an opportunity wasted and it will be even more wasted if we do not get to Monday.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 7, which is tabled in my name. I thank Members from across the House for supporting it and the Minister for the listening to my pleas. In short, new clause 7 intends to prevent the imposition of council tax on individual tenants of a room in a house with shared facilities, or in a licensed house of multiple occupancy.

This issue came to light in my Gosport constituency where the high street, like so many others up and down the country, is in decline. A local businessman, Daryn Brewer, identified an opportunity to breathe new life into our high streets and at the same time create affordable accommodation for young professionals. He is doing that by buying up empty disused shops, redeveloping them and bringing local independent traders into the shop space while converting the spaces above into high quality shared living accommodation. The residents have high-spec individual ensuite bedrooms, but shared kitchen, laundry and workspaces. They are effectively professional houses of multiple occupation and are known as Pro Pods. This is levelling up in its most pure form: reimagining our high streets as places where we do not just shop, but live, work, socialise and spend our time. At a stroke, it makes low-cost, high quality affordable living accommodation and takes some of the strain off the housing market.

Generally speaking, HMOs are in band C or D for council tax and are therefore classed as one dwelling, meaning the landlord is legally responsible for paying the council tax for that single dwelling. However, over recent years there has been a growing trend for the Valuation Office Agency to start to re-band those bedrooms as individual dwellings in and of themselves, meaning residents across Gosport, Portsmouth and, increasingly,

across the whole country, are being hit with unexpected and completely unaffordable council tax bills. The VOA has stated that it is not taking a new approach to HMOs or systematically revaluing HMOs. However, this is a growing issue, one that my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) and I have brought to the attention of successive Ministers over the last couple of years, and one that colleagues across the House are increasingly seeing among their local landlords and developers. That is evidenced by the number of Members backing new clause 7.

There are several reasons why this issue poses a problem. First and foremost, it is placing a huge financial strain on people, often young professionals at the very start of their careers, who are suddenly landed with a council tax bill of up to £1,000, even after they have been allocated the single person discount. In some cases, it has even been backdated three years, so there could be a bill of up to £3,000. We can imagine how this is causing untold distress and misery, especially at a time when other living costs are rising. There have even been incidents of previous tenants being chased for a council tax bill they did not know they owed after they had moved out, due to reclassifying and backdating—a dreadful situation.

Shared housing is a core pillar of the housing sector. In 2018, HMOs provided up to 3 million sharers with rental accommodation across England and Wales. It is a significant contribution to the housing sector, so this issue has the potential to become a major problem. If these bedrooms start to be classified as dwellings and become band A, where the tenant is legally liable for paying the council tax, goodness knows where it will end. There are other knock-on impacts of this trend that I want, very briefly, to put on the record.

Disaggregation creates individual units, which are usually not self-contained. Once disaggregated, there is nothing to stop a landlord putting cooking facilities into these places retrospectively, thus creating miniature flats. Those do not meet housing standards or create quality living environments.

We also have the issue of housing numbers. Bedrooms within HMOs that are rebanded create a “dwelling” in law. That means that those bedrooms are added to the UK housing numbers, even though they do not meet the minimum national space standards and are not self-contained. Unwittingly, the VOA, local authorities and therefore, ultimately, the Government would be fudging the housing numbers. For each bedroom that is rebanded by the VOA as a dwelling, local authorities can claim on the new homes bonus scheme. That suggests that the Government could award those bonuses to local authorities without proper homes being created through the usual planning process.

If this continues and bedrooms keep being rebanded, the Government could be seen to be encouraging the creation of dwellings that simply do not meet national space standards. Unless they grip that growing issue, they will potentially create substandard rental properties that would contradict the renters reform Bill and the decent homes White Paper.

The Bill is fundamentally about levelling up our wonderful country. By not addressing this issue, we are doing a disservice to our constituents, many of whom are young strivers, simply trying to build their careers and make their way in life. They have been hit unexpectedly

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

with an extra financial strain that they have not budgeted for and certainly do not deserve, at a time they can least afford it.

I deeply regret that I had to table an amendment to put a stop to this. I have frequently raised the issue with the relevant Departments, but it has fallen on deaf ears. It has led me to fear, until this point, that some people working in this area may have forgotten that council tax is a property tax, not a head tax. It should not be down to individuals who are paying simply for a bedroom to foot the bill.

That is why I am deeply grateful to the Minister and the Secretary of State for engaging with me so brilliantly and openly on this issue, and for confirming that they will have an accelerated consultation on the issue with a view, potentially, to introducing the relevant regulations to prevent this happening and to address it. That will need to cover how we deal with the sites that have already been revalued, the bills that have been issued and the arrears that have been incurred, so that is not straightforward.

I am grateful for the Minister's commitment to address this matter, and I have no doubt that she will. I know that she cares deeply about levelling up. She is an excellent Minister and I know that she wants to seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to get the Bill right and deal with this issue. I thank the Minister for her commitment. I will not push my amendment to a vote and I look forward to working with her to make sure that we solve this issue once and for all.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I will speak to new clause 82 and amendments 71 and 72 in my name and those of my hon. Friends. New clause 82 seeks to reinstate the standards board. Every single one of us in this place should be able to get behind that, as it is not partisan; it is about restoring the public's faith in local politics.

We have all seen examples of councillors acting outwith their role and their code of conduct. We also see, often, that the act that eventually leads to their demise follows an established pattern of behaviour spanning many years. Those around them may have been fearful of calling out their behaviour for many reasons. Last year, a councillor was sentenced after pleading guilty to a charge relating to the abuse of public trust in public office, yet he remains in post. In another area, two former council chiefs and a county council leader are due to appear in court after being charged in connection with a long-running police investigation into allegations of financial irregularity.

We all know, of course, that those cases are in the minority and that the vast number of councillors work hard for their community. However, those who behave in that way are currently given a free ride, as the framework around complaints is largely kept in-house. Councils and fellow councillors should simply not be allowed to police themselves. Such an arrangement puts officers, and particularly monitoring officers, in impossible positions. Those officers, who are in contractually and politically restricted positions, somehow have to find ways to manage governance and the expectations and pressures of political groups when the sanctions available to the standards committee are very limited and its

members are political colleagues of those they are investigating. That point was noted by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which reported:

"We have heard of cases where Monitoring Officers have been put under undue pressure or forced to resign because of unwelcome advice or decisions".

A *Local Government Chronicle* survey finds that 60% of monitoring officers do not believe that they have sufficient tools to tackle serious misconduct among elected members.

4.15 pm

In this place, we have an independent and transparent complaints process. We are also under a lot of scrutiny. However, fewer residents and news reporters take an interest in the actions of local councils and councillors. In local councils, the current system for upholding standards and monitoring behaviour is simply too opaque and too open to interpretation and abuse. There are not provisions to suspend or disqualify councillors who act inappropriately and misuse public funds.

I know all too well from my own local authority the consequences of limited checks and balances and of processes open to potential undue interference. The former leader of my council, Iain Malcolm, resigned all his posts and positions suddenly in 2020 in the wake of allegations of creating a culture of fear, bullying and control. There were scandals in which public finances were readily accessed for personal reputational defence and to silence critics, as well as a litany of other financial concerns. He left just weeks after the chief executive walked out after 10 years in post. Police and other investigations are still ongoing.

This Government want more devolution. With that, there should come more accountability, because with devolution comes more responsibility and more money from the public purse. The Committee on Standards in Public Life's 2019 report echoes the concerns that I am raising today:

"Our evidence supports the view that the vast majority of councillors and officers maintain high standards of conduct. There is, however, clear evidence of misconduct by some councillors. The majority of these cases relate to bullying or harassment, or other disruptive behaviour. There is also evidence of persistent or repeated misconduct by a minority of councillors."

It is little wonder that respondents to the *Local Government Chronicle* survey called for

"a single national code of conduct for councillors"

and for

"more effective sanctions, including suspension and disqualification".

It is clear that the current system is not working and that the handling of complaints relating to councillors who breach codes should be thoroughly independent. The Minister rejected my clause in Committee—then new clause 76—on the basis that the Government, despite clear evidence of misconduct in local councils, have not changed their mind since 2011. The Government remain stubbornly of the view that the Standards Board was

"incompatible with the principles of localism"

and that its abolition

"restored power to local people."—[*Official Report, Levelling-up and Regeneration Public Bill Committee*, 20 October 2022; c. 907.]

Mr Betts: One of the problems with the Standards Board was that it was simply overwhelmed with complaints because residents were allowed to go to it at first instance, rather than appealing to it if their local authority did

not deal properly with their case. Another problem was that parish council complaints were allowed under it. If those two issues had been addressed, the Standards Board could have dealt with a smaller number of cases, as an appeal system. It would have been a very different arrangement.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend is correct. It is simply not in the interests of local people to have no mechanism at all to remove someone from office who is acting inappropriately. People in my area who have experienced the damage caused by our previous council leader and his supporters find offensive the suggestion that removing that level of accountability has somehow given them more of a voice or restored any power to them.

It is the greatest honour to serve our community, whether at council level or in Parliament. With that should come appropriate checks, balances and levels of accountability. The public need confidence in the system. They need to know that cases such as those that I have mentioned will never happen again. My new clause would ensure that.

Amendments 71 and 72 simply ask that the Government align the levelling-up missions with the United Nations sustainable development goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people—the poor and the vulnerable, including infants—to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round, and that it be measured by tracking the prevalence of undernourishment in the population and the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, based on the food insecurity experience scale. It is astonishing that a Bill that attempts to level up all parts of the UK does not mention hunger or food insecurity once, despite the Government acknowledging that it is not possible to level up the country without reducing the number of children going hungry and living in poverty.

George Eustice: The hon. Lady is right that this is an incredibly important issue, but is it not the case that all these issues were addressed through the Agriculture Act 2020, and the requirement to publish every three years a food security report that includes very detailed chapters on household food insecurity, which is what she is concerned about?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. He will know that those measurements have not resulted in reduced levels of poverty. The amendments would strengthen the Government's commitment to reducing it.

There are 14.5 million people living in poverty across our country. Poverty among children and pensioners rose in the six years prior to covid, alongside a resurgence of Victorian diseases associated with malnutrition, such as scurvy and rickets. Surely the Government must have grasped that for at least five of their own missions to succeed people need access to food. Living standards, education, skills, health and wellbeing are all deeply impacted in a household impacted by hunger. The Government's own reporting in the family resources survey, which was made possible only after years of campaigning to implement my Food Insecurity Bill, shows that households in the north-east are more likely to struggle to afford food than those anywhere else in

the country. It would be totally misguided to think that we can level up the country without addressing that issue.

We know that the figures will increase. Already this year food insecurity has risen by almost 10%. Thanks to the Government's economic mismanagement, the biggest fall in household incomes on record will only exacerbate those levels of hunger. The Food Foundation has found that levels of food insecure households are rising, with figures for September this year showing a prevalence in nearly 10 million adults, with 4 million children also suffering from hunger. If it were not for the over 2,500 food banks in the country, those adults and children would be without food. That should be a source of great shame for Government Members.

Regional disparities, which the Bill supposedly aims to level out, are more stark when we look at the fact that life expectancy in my part of the world, the north-east, is two and a half years less than in the south-east. Increasing healthy life expectancy is a huge challenge. The pandemic revealed the serious underlying health inequalities in this country. Public health funding will play a crucial role in helping to achieve the mission; however, in the most recent allocation councils faced a real-terms cut. That is just another example of where the Government's actions do not meet their levelling-up rhetoric.

The Government commissioned a national food strategy, which found that diet is the leading cause of avoidable harm to our health; however, the Government have ignored Henry Dimbleby's recommendation to increase free school meals eligibility. If the Government are serious about levelling up, tackling food insecurity is vital to achieving the levelling-up White Paper's missions. As Anna Taylor, chief exec of the Food Foundation, said:

"If the Government wants to really get to grips with the issue, a comprehensive approach to levelling-up must tackle food insecurity head on."

The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), claimed that the amendments in Committee were not needed as the Bill is

"designed to establish the framework for the missions"—[*Official Report, Levelling-up and Regeneration Public Bill Committee*, 20 October 2022; c. 859.]

not the content of them. That sums up the vacuous nature behind all the missions in the Bill. By making them as opaque as possible, and lacking such content, the Government will not have to bother delivering on a single one of them.

The Government should accept this amendment today. By doing so, they would signal that at long last they accept that people are going hungry on their watch and they are eventually prepared to do something about it. I sincerely hope that they will do this, but I expect that they will not. In any event, I look forward to the Minister's response later on.

John Stevenson: I want to speak to new clauses 1 and 2, but particularly new clause 1, which relates to the election of Mayors. These are straightforward new clauses and I will not be putting them to a vote, but I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to new clause 1 in particular, because I think it addresses a gap in the current devolution discussions.

[*John Stevenson*]

When it comes to devolution, my preferred option would be for far more radical reform. I believe that local government in England is in need of substantial reform and that the Government should embrace devolution. The way to do this is to have devolution settlements right across the country with the appropriate powers and responsibilities so that we properly decentralise and also have consistency. I also think that, as part of that, the introduction of Mayors everywhere is a positive thing.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not recognise that, as we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), not every area of the country wants a Mayor, and that it would be wrong to force a Mayor on those areas?

John Stevenson: I will come to that point about particular areas. My belief is that if we believe in devolution, we have to set out what we believe, embrace it and introduce it. One of the problems with our present devolution settlement is that there is too much inconsistency. There is a patchwork of devolution and a patchwork of local government that is not in any way beneficial for individual areas or for the country as a whole.

I genuinely believe that the introduction of Mayors has brought leadership to particular areas. It also creates accountability and responsibility, and we are seeing the successes up and down the country, including in Teesside, in the midlands and in Manchester, where we have Mayors who have demonstrated leadership in their locality. But the Government's approach seems to be very different. They have adopted what I would describe as a gradualist approach to devolution, a policy that appears to be about bottom-up with a degree of incentives or pushing local areas to go down a particular route. I accept that it has had some success, and there is indeed some potential success in the pipeline, but it has been limited to date.

The result of Government policy is uneven devolution and, as I have said, a patchwork of inconsistency across the country. What we really need is clarity and consistency, but I accept that that is probably going to be for the future rather than for the next couple of years. Right now, I do at least support the direction of travel that the Government are taking with regard to devolution and I will certainly support the Bill, but their approach appears to be only to approach existing local authorities to instigate discussions for a devolution settlement in that particular area. They are almost waiting for requests for devolution, and any success will depend on the decisions of local authorities in particular parts of the country.

But what about those areas where there is support for devolution, but not necessarily from the local authority in that area? Areas can be held back by the actions of individuals or individual authorities when in fact that locality supports a devolution settlement and actually wants one. We saw that happen in Cumbria a few years back when a devolution settlement was in prospect but held back in many respects by the views of the leader of a particular council. For example, businesses in a particular area could be supportive of a Mayor and devolution, as could charities, parish councillors and minority political parties on councils—indeed, councils could be divided

on the issue—but for one reason or another the dominant view would be against a devolution settlement rather than for one. There could also be support for devolution among the wider population. There is a growing appreciation that areas that do not end up with a devolution settlement and a Mayor are likely to be left behind. Because of the finance and a Mayor's ability to be an advocate, areas will lose out if they do not have that voice. When the Chancellor goes to the north of England to speak to local leaders, his automatic choice will be to speak to Mayors. Areas that are bereft of a devolution settlement do not have a Mayor, so they will be left behind.

I tabled new clause 1 to create a reserve power for the Government to step in if they feel that a particular area has an appetite for devolution and a Mayor but is being held back by, say, the machinations of local politics. Having that reserve power would enhance the Government's ability to negotiate devolution deals and would strengthen their position. I therefore hope they will consider introducing this measure.

4.30 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I support the amendments in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). This debate has illustrated a central defect in the Bill, to which I will return when I address clause 1.

People going hungry is clearly a product of 10 to 12 years of austerity and deepening division in our society. Somebody needs to get a grip on this. I represent 23 ex-mining villages in the heart of England, in Yorkshire. Cornwall is a very special place, but Yorkshire is God's own county. The county of the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) may have a special constitutional role, but Yorkshire has a divine role.

It is interesting that the Bill has no vision for what parish and town councils can do. Notwithstanding that, parish and town councils in my area are the ones feeding the hungry and, now, opening up warm places for elderly people and families to go to, because of the cost of energy. They are the ones doing the levelling up.

When there was a problem with people leaving their home because of covid, who arranged for people in my village to knock on doors to offer to go to the Co-op? It was the town and parish councils. They organised the churches, the voluntary sector and all the other bodies in the village. I represent 23 ex-mining villages, and it happened everywhere in my constituency. Why are we distributing power away from the centre in a top-down, uniform, homogenous way that is convenient only to the men and women in Westminster, rather than to the communities we represent, which are so different in character?

The Bill is full of constitutional changes, structural changes and processes, but it does not specify the outcomes. Part 1 refers to the mission statements that will be produced, but there is no reference in the Bill to what those mission statements will contain. However, the White Paper has a helpful indication of what the mission statements, which the Minister will eventually organise, will contain. She needs to tell the House what her intentions are in relation to the mission statements, because there is nothing in the Bill.

Clause 1 talks about the mission statements being “laid before each House of Parliament”.

Does that mean there will be a vote? Will the mission statements be amendable? Laying them before the House might mean putting them in the Library, which is simply not acceptable. If the Bill does not allow the House to discuss the objectives we are trying to achieve, there must be proper scrutiny of the matter in the House of Commons.

The amendments in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) raise the question of outcomes, rather than process. She wants to see young people—in fact, all our people—fed. The Bill does not allow for that, because we are dealing with structures rather than outcomes. I want to illustrate this with two further points that are in the mission statements in the White Paper, but not in the Bill. They relate to bus transportation, which the Minister referred to, and another point. I will talk about them quickly, because there is not a lot of time.

My constituency is the 529th least socially mobile constituency in England. There are 533 on the list, so only four seats have less mobility than mine. What does that mean? A child born in poverty today in my constituency will almost certainly die in poverty—there is no social mobility unless we do something dramatic—and younger than children being born elsewhere. That is not acceptable.

Social mobility is about education and all sorts of other things, but there are two things I want to focus on briefly. One is transport. In a village that has no work any more—remember that the villages were built around coal mines, which have all gone—it is very difficult to find work. People have to move from one place to another, but the way in which we organise our public transport system is not helpful. I met a woman who walks in the dark for an hour from one village to another to work, and then back in the dark at night. That is not acceptable.

There are 24,000 people in my constituency—I raise my constituency to illustrate a broader point—without access to a car. I asked how many people use a bus or a train. Out of the whole constituency, only 3,900 people use either a bus or a train, yet there are 24,000 people without a car. The buses stop early in the evening and start later in the morning. Lloyds bank tell me that of the 650 seats in our country, people in mine rank 621st for how likely we are to use public transport, through our credit or debit cards or however we pay. That is not acceptable. Will the Minister accept that something has gone radically wrong with our public transport system that in a constituency such as mine with no social mobility at all, people are imprisoned in villages with no work and no public transport? Something drastic needs to be done about it, which is not in the Bill.

Another point that is in the White Paper but not the Bill is digital exclusion. The White Paper states that digital exclusion and social exclusion go together. Of course they do, but here is the fact. In my constituency, there is no easy way to move around without a car—using cars is not a great thing anyway for the planet—but the download speed in my village is 46 megabits per second. The average for the UK is 86. We have people running businesses in the constituency who cannot move to a job somewhere, and it is not working. I met a guy—an ex-miner—who had won this wonderful contract to

provide design solutions for the New York stock exchange. Guess what? He was doing the design at work in my constituency but he had to put the computer in the back of the car and drive it home so that he could access the internet in the evening. That is not acceptable.

As for telephones, in my house I cannot use a mobile phone. What I want is a discussion not about my constituency, but about everyone who lives in left-behind or held-back communities up and down our country. The talk of levelling up in the Bill gave them hope. Everybody has clocked those words, but they have also clocked something else: the Government have not willed the means to change what has happened to so many communities, which are locked out of the so-called prosperity of our country. I feel very angry about this, and I am very disappointed with this Bill.

My final point is on local government. I was council leader in Leeds, one of the great cities of the country. We had resources to begin to make a difference, although not enough—we always needed more; council leaders will always say that—but local authorities no longer have the resources to deliver the kind of levelling-up agenda the Government say they want. We see that in every single service—buses, trains, education, feeding people who are hungry. Funding for all those areas has been cut.

There was a discussion earlier in the debate about literacy. My constituency has some of the worst educational attainment figures in the country, and school funding has been cut by 40% during this Government’s time in office. We cannot level up on peanuts or simply by changing structures; we have to will the means as well.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I rise to speak in support of new clause 34, which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and others have tabled in this group of amendments. It forms part of a larger package of new clauses and amendments, most of which will be debated on day two, and I will try not to trespass too much on to those other amendments.

New clause 34 would require a review to be carried out of the Secretary of State’s compulsory purchase powers. Subsection (3) highlights the particular importance of properties which have been unoccupied for a prolonged period and buildings of local public importance in our high streets which might also have been left unused. The new clause highlights the importance of bringing derelict land back into use. We all know new homes need to be provided; we need to do more to make sure that land that is derelict and unoccupied is put to use to help deliver those new homes, hence the new clause. We should use this kind of brownfield site, particularly in urban areas, as a key way to address concerns about the supply of housing, and to do so in a way that does not undermine local decision making or damage the environment, as is the case with other aspects of our planning system.

Of course care must be taken with regard to the exercise of compulsory purchase powers; it is a serious matter to remove someone’s property, even if a fair price is paid. The landowner should be given appropriate compensation, and relevant planning rules must be followed in terms of what actually gets built on these derelict sites—for example, green-belt land protection must not be compromised—but I genuinely believe

[Theresa Villiers]

there is scope for expansion of the use of compulsory purchase powers to open up more brownfield sites for new homes.

This new clause is supported by the Local Government Association, and I am grateful to it for that. I believe that there is some appetite in local government to move to a more active approach on compulsory purchase order powers. Landowners must be given a chance to remedy the problem and start using the land in a positive way, but if they fail to do so—if sites lie abandoned for years and years, for example—it seems not unreasonable for the state or local authority to step in and get some homes built there. I gather that there can be genuine problems in establishing who the owner is, and the review called for in the new clause should consider how this could be resolved, for example through insurance.

The review requested in this new clause should also consider buildings of community importance in our town centres, which may also be left unoccupied for a protracted period. Regeneration of our town centres is of course a core aim of this Government and this Bill. Again, I acknowledge that CPOs are a serious step and should only be undertaken after careful consideration and consultation, but proportionate use of such powers by local councils could be helpful in unlocking broader regeneration schemes to boost high streets.

I take this opportunity to make a broader point about our local high streets and the crucial role that they play in our communities. We all know that they have faced so much adversity over recent years. The big shift to online retail has reduced footfall and made it harder and harder to sustain viable businesses in our town centres. Covid, of course, intensified that trend. That is why I very much welcome the huge programme of grants and support that were delivered by the Government during the pandemic for local businesses in high streets, especially for hospitality.

4.45 pm

I welcome the cuts in business rates for small high street businesses that we have seen delivered over recent years and for which I have lobbied many Chancellors. I also welcome the provisions of the Bill that are designed to give our town centres a brighter future, as they play such a crucial role in our constituencies. In Chipping Barnet, they will always be one of my highest priorities, and I urge the Minister to place the highest of priority on reviving our high streets right across our nation.

In conclusion, I wish to take a slightly broader look at the debate around the Bill. New clause 34, which I have spoken about, is part of a bigger package of amendments designed to remedy very serious problems with the planning system. The debate on that package was due to happen on Monday. I understand that that has been postponed. I welcome that decision. Postponing day two of Report is a sensible move.

Planning legislation does not come along very often, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you will be aware. It could be another decade before a Bill on planning pulls up at the station. We must not lose the opportunity to remedy the flaws in the planning system, which I and many on these Back Benches have highlighted so many times over the past few years. In particular, top-down

housing targets should be scrapped, because they are undermining local control over planning decisions and creating pressure for development, which is damaging to the local environment and to the quality of life of our constituents. We also need to address the crisis in some parts of this country, which is seeing swathes of homes removed from the residential rental market and diverted to Airbnb, leaving local residents with fewer and fewer places in which to live.

I welcome the indication from the Government—from the Secretary of State—that they are listening to Back Benchers on these crucial matters, which means so much to us and to the constituents whom we represent. Postponing Report day two gives us all the opportunity to seek to find a solution that delivers the right homes in the right places and that restores and retains the primacy of local decision making in planning. We cannot carry on as we are, with the toxic impact that these targets are having. We must have change. This Bill is our opportunity to deliver that change. I look forward to a robust debate during day two's group of amendments. We on the Back Benches are determined that the concerns of our constituents on overdevelopment will be heard loud and clear.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I rise to speak to my amendments 69 and 70, but before doing so I want to put on record my support for the amendments in favour of “true devolution”, as others have been saying, not delegation in all of its messiness. In particular, I support the amendments advocated by the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

It is also a great pleasure to speak after my colleague, the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), who spoke so powerfully about the importance of devolution. From what he was saying, very much focusing on the issues of inequality and social justice, I guess the comments that I would like to add are from the angle of sustainability. If we are to have any hope of meeting our decarbonisation targets, it will be by pushing power down to a more local level. In my view, both social and environmental justice are absolutely served by serious devolution, not by what we have had served up to us today.

Turning to my amendments, amendment 69 would support a just transition for workers in high-carbon industries, such as oil and gas workers in the North sea. We know there are huge opportunities that come with the transition to a zero carbon economy but, as it stands, those workers risk losing out and being held back from accessing good green jobs instead.

Research published in 2020 revealed a huge appetite to be part of the transition to the zero carbon economy, with more than 80% of those surveyed working in oil and gas saying they would consider moving to a job outside their industry and more than half saying they would choose to transition to renewables and offshore wind if they had the opportunity to retrain. However, as things stand, oil and gas workers face an often insurmountable barrier to doing so, because they would have to pay for entirely new training courses, despite there being many shared skills among the offshore energy sectors. That is on top of an average of £1,800 a year that workers currently pay out of their own pockets to maintain their existing training and safety qualifications.

Since I tabled amendments during the passage of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, calling for what is often referred to as an offshore training passport, the training standards bodies OPITO, the Global Wind Organisation and the International Marine Contractors Association have all announced that they are looking at training duplication and mapping out pathways forward. That is welcome, but much more needs to be done to ensure a truly just transition for oil and gas workers, who have valuable skills and experience in offshore energy.

We simply cannot allow communities to be hollowed out and left behind as we strive to meet our climate targets. We must learn the lesson of what happened when the coal mines were closed and the dislocation that was caused, which communities are still living with today. That cannot be allowed to happen again.

New research from the organisation Platform shows that investment in three key energy sectors—offshore wind, retrofitting and electrolyser manufacturing—could pave the way for more than 100,000 green jobs in regions with high oil and gas employment. A just transition for workers in the fossil fuel industry is both possible and necessary, and my amendment would support that goal. Specifically, the amendment would require that the first statement of levelling-up missions include the mission to increase significantly the number of people completing high-quality skills training, bringing the commitment in the levelling up White Paper into the text of the Bill itself. Crucially, it makes explicit that that training must include green skills training for workers in high-carbon industries who wish to transition to careers in well-paid green energy sectors, with cross-sectoral recognition of skills regardless of their current contract status. It gets to the very heart of what levelling up ought to mean and ensures that all communities are able to reap the rewards of our transition to a greener and fairer economy.

My second amendment, amendment 70, would rectify the failure of any of the current levelling-up missions to acknowledge the importance of access to nature in shaping how people feel about where they live. The covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of access to nature and a recent survey by Natural England found that 90% of people agreed that natural spaces are good for both mental health and physical wellbeing. Yet we know that people from ethnic minorities or those with low incomes are much less likely to live near accessible green space, and there is a particular inequality in access to our wilder and more open spaces. The Campaign for National Parks estimates that while, for example, 60% of the Yorkshire dales is open access, the public have the right to roam across just 0.5% of the broads in Norfolk and Suffolk.

My amendment takes inspiration from the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Amendment) Bill, my private Member's Bill, which recently started its Second Reading that is due to be resumed in March next year. That Bill has support from all sides of the House and would amend the CROW Act to include more landscapes such as rivers, woods, more grasslands and green belt, essentially extending access to approximately 30% of English land from just 8% that we are currently legally able to access in England.

Amendment 70 would require that the first statement of levelling-up missions include a mission to expand public access to nature and to reduce geographic inequalities

in access to open space land. It addresses the frankly extraordinary omission of nature from this Bill, and would have a potentially transformational effect in improving access to our beautiful countryside and the wellbeing and mental health benefits that that would bring. I hope the Government will consider it.

James Grundy: First of all, I commend the Minister on what I thought was an excellent opening speech. It was the first time I have been in the Chamber when she has given one. I thank her not just for that but for the time that she makes available to Back Benchers such as me for discussions on levelling up. I know that we all greatly appreciate it.

I also commend my hon. Friends on the Back Benches who have done so much work in putting forward important amendments. I hope that the Government will, as they have indicated, incorporate the vast majority of those amendments into the Bill. It is important that some of the issues raised by Back-Bench colleagues are addressed, and so far, I have been heartened by what has been said.

On the Bill itself, I was heartened when the Minister spoke about infrastructure. As many people will know, the constituency of Leigh has wanted a bypass for 60 years and has been waiting for it to be completed for 40 years. The problem is that the Atherleigh Way bypass runs across three local authorities and two counties, and it is difficult to get this stuff finished under existing laws.

As Andy Burnham—the previous incumbent of my seat—used to say, Leigh is one of the largest towns in the north-west of England without a railway station. Well, I am very pleased to say that, after 60 years, Golborne station is being reopened, and I am hopeful that we will be able to get a station opened for Leigh as well. Of course, levelling up is a cross-departmental discipline.

On regeneration, Leigh Means Business, the local community interest company, has provided me with information stating that almost 25% of commercial property in the centre of Leigh is vacant and unused. I think that goes to the point made by colleagues about the importance of bringing back into use brownfield sites in red-wall town centres such as mine before we start chipping away at the green belt and the green fields on the edge of town.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am so delighted that my hon. Friend is making that point, because it is pretty much central to so much of what we want to see. We are accused of being nimbys and of saying no, no, no to everything, but we have a dozen-plus amendments because we want to find solutions for the Government. We loathe the top-down targets because they are fantastically un-Conservative, but we are desperate to try to find a way to change the balance between brownfield and greenfield development. Does he agree that if we can get that change in dynamic, we can fire up a development boom in this country? We could avoid so many of the stresses about greenfield development by focusing much more on brownfield.

James Grundy: I am glad that my hon. Friend says that, because before my slip was withdrawn this morning, I was meant to be in Greater Manchester speaking about Greater Manchester Combined Authority's "Places for

[James Grundy]

Everyone” strategic development plan. I attended a session about two or three weeks ago, and the point was made—not just by me but by others, including the CPRE—that if we focused on addressing the proper use of brownfield sites in Greater Manchester, we would be able to fulfil the target set under the “Places for Everyone” plan without taking a single piece of green belt. I am delighted that these issues have been brought to the fore. I served for 13 years as a councillor on Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, and these arguments have been batted back and forth for many years, so I am tremendously pleased that we have been able to bring these issues to the fore.

On the technical matters, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) said that he thought it might be better if a separate planning Bill had been introduced, and I think there is a strong case for that, but we are where we are. As I said, I am pleased that the Government intend to listen to the concerns of Back Benchers and incorporate a number of remedies that I think will be of great importance for improving the Bill.

There is, however, one matter on which, I am afraid, I am not entirely on board with the Government. I am sure that it will not come as a shock to anyone on either Front Bench that I am not a tremendous fan of elected Mayors. To my mind, the correct approach to reforming local government is through localism, and not devolution, because the problem we have with the form of devolution that the Government have chosen is that it creates a number of unaccountable sinecures that will be run by regional Svengalis. The problem is that this encourages a form of challenge to the Government whereby a regional Mayor of whatever stripe stands up and says, “The Government are terrible, give me more money.” [Interruption.] I see the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) is somewhat amused.

5 pm

Jon Trickett *rose*—

James Grundy: I will give way happily.

Jon Trickett: Why would someone not speak up for local communities against a Government making mistaken decisions? Why on earth should that be a bad thing?

James Grundy: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. The issue is that it does not matter what the actual circumstances are. Regardless of the facts on the ground, Mayors are incentivised by the nature of their role to stand up and say, “I am fighting for my area.” It encourages them to concoct fights with central Government, regardless of the issue. Then we end up with this position where there is constant strife between central Government and regional Mayors.

The problem with regional Mayors—a number of colleagues including my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) have made excellent points on this—is that it creates one single figure representing in some cases millions of people. A huge amount of power is vested in that individual, and that is deeply unhealthy.

We have heard the arguments for a sense of conformity across local government. I fear that that approach replicates the errors of the 1973 local government reforms, which

created ever-larger local authorities. I remember—it was before I was born—that the campaign against it was, “Don’t vote for Mr R. E. Mote”, because the feeling was that the decision-making process was being removed ever further away from small communities to large, more remote places. As I am sure the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) knows, because we share a borough, the people of Leigh in the 1970s campaigned hard to avoid being merged into the Metropolitan Borough of Wigan, and we lost, much to our immense regret. Other communities, such as Warrington, that campaigned successfully to stay out of Greater Manchester are much happier in Cheshire. I know that the good people of Bury successfully campaigned to stay out of the much larger Rochdale borough that was proposed. I fear that we are replicating the errors of the 1973 local government reforms on a county level or, indeed, a multi-county level with these regional Mayors.

I am sure you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there is not universal approval for the idea that everywhere should have Mayors. I spoke on “Sunday Politics North West” a number of months ago, and there was cross-party agreement that Lancashire—your home county, where your fine constituency of Ribble Valley lies—wanted a combined local authority, not a Mayor, and I fully support that. It had universal cross-party approval. My understanding is that other areas, such as Cheshire, are basically not entirely on board with the idea of a Mayor covering the entire county.

We have heard about Cornwall, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth made a compelling case. The only bit I did not agree with was where he said that Cornwall was a special case. I agreed with every word he said except that, because I believe that every part of England that does not want a mayoral devolution settlement should not be forced to have one. Furthermore, I also agree with Opposition Members who said that the best sort of levelling-up deal and funding should not be tied to having a Mayor. That is an obnoxious provision with which I profoundly disagree. I am afraid that on that particular issue, the Government will not have my support. I place my grave reservations about that measure on record.

In broad terms, I think the Bill is superb. A number of improvements have been made during its progress, and as I have said before, I thank Members who have come forward with amendments, and I thank the Minister for her response on how they will address that. As I have said, I have grave concerns about the path of devolution that we are taking as a Government and those issues need to be addressed. One size fits all will not work across the whole of England. We have to address the serious issues at the heart of trying to hammer square pegs into round holes.

The Minister referred to the Greater Manchester trailblazer devolution deal, just as the Chancellor did in the autumn statement, but I would appreciate it if she conveyed to the Secretary of State that I, and other Greater Manchester MPs, would very much like to be briefed on that. While the Government may have spoken to the Mayor of Greater Manchester, I am afraid that consultation on the issue with Greater Manchester colleagues has not been forthcoming—I see the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan, nodding. I assume that, like me, she has received very little consultation, or none.

Over the past few years, there has been an unfortunate tendency for Governments and Departments to seem far happier speaking to regional Mayors than to Members of this House. Members of the House should firmly resist the idea of being turned into powerless cyphers. In my view, a Mayor is a part of local government. They should have a lesser role in the governance of this nation than we do as Members of Parliament. To dilute the powers of Members of this House is fundamentally wrong.

After all, the vast majority of Mayors, other than in London, where there is a full Assembly, have scant accountability mechanisms—there is no Greater Manchester Assembly or Merseyside Assembly. Vesting such powers in individuals who negotiate directly with Government Departments, with scant input from Members of Parliament whose areas those mayoral authorities covers, is an unsustainable position. I understand that that is not the fault of the Minister, but I hope she will stress very firmly to the Secretary of State that the issue needs to be addressed, and addressed quickly.

I have covered everything I want to say. Overall, the core of this legislation is extremely sound. I commend the work of the Minister and her colleagues, as well that of colleagues who worked on the Bill before she took up her role. The tension between devolution and localism has come up today and, unless it is addressed, it will continue to come up as we discuss other pieces of legislation. The thing about devolution is that everything tends to get devolved after time and as MPs we get asked about everything. If we become shut out of the discussion and the process, that will present problems, regardless of party and across the House.

Mr Betts: We have before us something called a Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. I agree with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) who said that the Bill might be better if the planning elements had been taken out of it. The problem is that that would not have left much remaining, because essentially it is a planning Bill with bit of levelling up tacked on.

Indeed, as I said on Second Reading, the Bill has no new powers and there is no new money for levelling up and devolution. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee has launched an inquiry into the funding of devolution and levelling up. We have just started taking evidence and it will be interesting to see what conclusions are found, based on that evidence.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) that we are diluting the powers of Members of Parliament. Hopefully, what we are doing is taking powers from central Government and handing them down to local government. I am in favour of that; we do not do nearly enough of that in this country. Indeed, as Members of Parliament we sometimes have to recognise that we do not have that much power. The Government get on with their business, and occasionally they tell us what they are doing.

James Grundy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiment, but my concern is that, effectively, devolved Mayors look increasingly like not local government but an interim tier of Government—almost like the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly.

Mr Betts: I will return to that, but I will first comment on the planning issues, which we will hopefully come back to at a future date. There are some challenges

around housing targets and how we get to 300,000 if we do not have the building blocks at a local level. I am sure that will be an interesting discussion.

I am in favour of building on brownfield sites wherever possible, because this is about regenerating and bringing life back to many areas that have suffered incredible decline. I would say, however—the Government will have to listen at some point—that building on brownfield sites is more expensive. In my constituency, there are old industrial areas with chemicals in the ground and old derelict buildings that need clearing and improving before we begin to put something new in their place. That is an expense. At some point, the public purse will have to find the money for that to enable private sector development.

The other day, I sat almost entranced for half an hour by a briefing from Professor Philip McCann, who is now at the Alliance Manchester Business School but was previously at the University of Sheffield. His description of this country was staggering. He talked about the inequalities between regions in this country that make us different and more unequal than any other country in western Europe. He said that the inequalities between the richest parts of the south-east and the rest of the country are now wider than they were between East and West Germany at the time of reunification, which is staggering. The richest part of the country in the south-east has a degree of affluence, an income and gross value added levels that make it very similar to the richest parts of western Europe. The rest of the country, particularly northern areas, have productivity levels below those of the Czech Republic. It is staggering that that is where we have got to. One of the big challenges is to remove that inequality.

We are one of the most centralised and unequal countries, so the idea that central government is the way to level up is nonsense; we level up only by getting powers down to local communities. To come back to the point of the hon. Member for Leigh, with which I am not sure I totally agree, that probably means that we need something beyond the size of an individual local authority to enable the economic transfer of power on the scale that is necessary to make a difference—to attract overseas investment, to get the skills agenda going, to put the transport infrastructure in place, and to do all the things that we want to see. That is why combined authorities are probably a good way forward—I will put one or two conditions on that in a second—with or without an elected Mayor.

I was against elected Mayors, but I have come round to the view that they work. I would not impose them on an area, but it is right to have that option. Most areas will conclude from what they have seen elsewhere that having a focal point has helped combined authorities to establish themselves in the public mind. Perhaps it does mean that Ministers go to the Mayors, but so what? I would sooner have Ministers going to the Mayor of South Yorkshire than not coming at all, which was probably the case before.

I have some further caveats, because the Bill does not go far enough to address those fundamental inequalities. I will pick up on the point of the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson). I remember that, in his time on the Select Committee, we discussed such issues and basically agreed, and I agreed with him today. He said that the Government have a “gradualist approach” and that we have a “patchwork” that lacks clarity, and he is right.

[Mr Betts]

We do not have a framework for devolution that covers the whole country so that we can see where the powers are going to sit. The Select Committee has asked for that and recently asked for it again. I challenged the then Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), when he came to give evidence to the Select Committee on why we could not see the operation of the subsidiarity that people used to argue for when we were in the European Union—the idea that things should be done at a local level unless there is a good reason for doing them at a national level. He said, “Oh that was a bit radical.” Well, it is a bit radical but it is probably right, and I hope that we can get to that position eventually or at least move towards it.

5.15 pm

There are no new powers in the Bill. At the beginning, I asked the Minister in an intervention where the new powers in the Bill are, and she mentioned—and I think it is right that we look at this—the discussions taking place with the Greater Manchester Mayor and the West Yorkshire Mayor. However, they are not actually new powers in the Bill; they are discussions going on at the side. There are no new powers in the Bill. There are extensions of existing powers to county combined authorities that are currently with the existing combined authorities, but they are not actually new. Where is the radical skills agenda, or the radical transfer of powers and finance for transport infrastructure and transport operations? They are simply not there. Authorities are going cap in hand for a bit of money to run their buses next year, and often not getting it, but that is not a radical transfer of power and resources. There are some real challenges about that, and such a framework ought to be there.

Even if we cannot have a framework and still have a deal-based approach, when right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) was Secretary of State, in his first go at the job, and was asked about the deals that were being done and whether if one combined authority got powers, he would look favourably on other combined authorities having similar powers—basically, the presumption was that that would happen—he said yes. Could the Government not at least get to the position that, if these deals come in for West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, other combined authorities, unless there is a very good reason, would automatically get those powers? That would at least be a step forward, and we could say that we have made some progress on this today.

I am a Sheffield MP, as well as Chair of the Select Committee, and at the moment there is not a single thing for South Yorkshire and Sheffield in this Bill—there is not a single thing about extra powers or extra money—so the challenge I would like to throw out is that the Government should at least spread the deals that are going to be done more widely. In preference, however, let us have a framework so that the whole of our country can see where they fit in and what they are entitled to. Some areas may decide that they do not want to take on some powers, do not want the responsibility and do not want the challenge. Okay, but that should be their decision. It is not for us to decide because, quite frankly, I do not know what is best in Cornwall, Cumbria

or, indeed, Leigh for that matter. The councillors there are closer to those communities, and they should therefore be the ones making the decisions. Let us get to that position, and get to it more quickly.

I will conclude with two points. On compulsory purchase orders, I was heartened, I think, by what the Minister said in response to an intervention. The land value compensation legislation needs abolishing. When the Land Compensation Act 1961 came in, it meant that when a piece of land is given planning permission, essentially the owner of that land gets added value based on what the land might be used for once the permission is given. If that legislation had been in place in 1945, we would not have built the new towns in this country; we could not have afforded them, because every time we declared a new town, the value of the land would have gone up through the roof—of course it would, because it was there for development.

At least let us have a look at this, so that when a council says it wants to compulsorily purchase a site to make it part of a major regeneration scheme, the value of that land does not increase simply because the CPO is going to be put in place and the land is going to become part of a regeneration scheme. We must have a look at that. I was reassured by the Minister's response, and I hope that actually gets transferred through.

Finally, if I went back to my constituents or, I suspect, those of any other Members in so-called levelling-up areas, and said, “Have you seen the benefits of levelling up in the last three years? Can you tell me the difference?”, I suspect the answer would probably be no, but no doubt the Minister will try to reassure us it is not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Following the last speaker, we will move on to the ministerial response.

Bob Seely: I am going to speak to new clause 34, and may make some broader points, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) did—I thank her for her great work and leadership on this issue. There are many good ideas that we have been discussing on all sides of the House today, and it is great to see such a brilliant Minister in her role and dealing with this Bill. Indeed, quite a few Ministers have been dealing with it, but I am glad that the buck has stopped with her. I welcome all and any measures to support levelling up.

The Isle of Wight is rich in so many ways, but economically is not necessarily one of them. We have a wonderful sense of community and a wonderful quality of life, but if I can achieve one thing in this place, it is to improve Islanders' life chances and opportunities. I am delighted that in the last five years the Government have been listening more than they have done previously. We have got £120 million of additional investment. There is £48 million for the NHS—the build at St Mary's is due to start in the next two weeks—and £26 million to rebuild the Island line. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago I was at Ryde Pier with my little hard hat on—a Boris look-alike or whatever—because the rebuild of the railway pier is now happening as well.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked what levelling up has done. Actually, we have got a 240-ton-lift crane in East Cowes for our shipyard, which will drive dozens of new jobs and apprenticeships in shipbuilding on the Isle of Wight. The clippers that

we see going up and down the Thames are made on the Island. We have lots of great things, including in training for Isle of Wight College.

One of the many things said by the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), which really sticks with me is that, “Talent is shared out equality in our nation, but opportunity isn’t.” We feel that, in a poorer part of a rich area.

I turn to compulsory purchase. If we go to any town or city in this country, apart from brownfield—I will come to that—we see long-term empty, derelict buildings. In coastal areas, as the Minister will know—it is fantastic that she has agreed to come to the Island and we very much look forward to hosting her—that problem is especially acute, particularly with former hotels. In Sandown, which is a town with a really lovely, wonderful community, some of our most important and valuable sites have stood empty for years. The Grand hotel is owned by a developer who seems to be unwilling to develop his own properties. The technical ownership of the Ocean hotel seems to change every month as it is flipped through a series of highly questionable companies. It is one of the most important sites in Sandown, and it is derelict and vandalised. We need the compulsory purchase powers. I respect property rights, but actually we need those powers to be as strong as possible so that communities such as mine and the Isle of Wight Council can use them to do good.

I am going to try this argument: I want to be able to get the Isle of Wight Council to compulsory purchase from the Government. Camp Hill prison site—the third prison site on the Island—has been empty for nine years. For five years I have been asking for a decision on Camp Hill. The Government cannot decide whether they want to turn it back into a prison, give us the land, sell it privately and so on. If they can give us that land at a price that we can afford, we can do real good with it, and we can build homes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet made the point that we want to propose good stuff. That is why, among 20 amendments and new clauses that we tabled, we have proposed new clause 34. There is an incredibly trite conversation around the issue, suggesting that those who object to top-down targets and the entirely depressing reliance on out-of-town, car-dependent housing estates plonked down in the middle of nowhere are somehow anti-young people or nimbys—a nimby is a local patriot, in my opinion—shouting, “No, no, no,” with their heads in the ground like ostriches. Actually, we are saying, “Yes, yes, yes” to so many ideas—we are trying to give the Government so many ideas—because we want planning and housing to be a success. We want to protect communities and, at the same time, we recognise that we need to build, but we want a system that is community-centred, environment-centred—environmentally friendly—and regeneration-centred.

When we have acre after acre of brownfield sites in towns and cities up and down the country, what on earth is the point of being reliant on developers lazily building on greenfield sites? That alienates older people in communities—they have their dog-walking routes and views ruined—yet so often, and especially in the home counties, those houses cannot be afforded by young people. All that happens is people move out of London.

That is a problem in Essex, Kent and Hampshire. On the Island, the dynamic is slightly different because people retire to us, but either way, despite having increased our population by 50% in 50 years, one of the most depressing facts is that we still export our young people too often.

New clause 34, which would give us compulsory powers to act in the public good, is only one of a series of, I hope, good ideas supported by my right hon. Friend, me and many people. For example, I think that for new clause 21, on top-down targets, we have more than 55 colleagues. Regardless of what the Labour party does, we need to work together. We want to work together with the Government in a spirit of co-operation, but can they please trust us and listen to us?

Another example of a good idea, apart from new clause 34, is the new clause on having a “Use it or lose it” rule to stop planners land-banking. I respectfully suggest to the Minister that a fundamental problem is not that planners do not give out permissions—80% get passed—or that pesky nimbys stop everything, because we know that is a load of rubbish. The fundamental problem is that developers have a vested interest in only releasing land for housing slowly, because that keeps the value of land high, house prices high, share prices high and bosses’ bonuses high. I sound a bit like I should be on the Opposition Benches. I am a big fan of capitalism, but I want capitalism to work. I want the developer industry to serve the people of this country, not its bosses.

We will achieve that by getting a system that works, so we want a new clause for “Use it or lose it.” We want a new clause that says, “Okay, you will have a time here and if you do not build out, you’re paying council tax on that 200-house estate. If you haven’t built it, you’re still paying council tax come what may.” We want bigger sticks. We want some nice carrots for brownfield, but we want bigger sticks for developers, so that when someone gets a 1,000-acre site they actually have to do something with it, and they cannot just sit on it and inflate their share price.

We want what is in the public interest. As soon as some people become Ministers, they think they know best—I am sure that this Minister does not think that—and they want top-down stuff, because that is where they drive reform. However, we know that a community with a neighbourhood plan is more likely to welcome development. Why? Because they get to shape it. All the so-called nimbys actually think, “Okay, here’s a home for my kids, a home for my daughter and son-in-law, a home for my grandkids.” They buy into it.

That is why top-down targets fundamentally do not work. They create an incredibly divisive battle. The Government say, “You have to build this many houses.” We get ridiculous, absurd numbers for the Isle of Wight, considering that our indigenous population is meant to decline by 9,000 over the next 15 years. We get targets and local government is put under pressure. The developers then start plonking down greenfield permissions, because they cannot be bothered to look at brownfield sites, which alienates communities. It becomes fundamentally divisive and adversarial.

Changing economic incentives would revolutionise development in this country, so that it becomes a win-win for communities. We could create more disincentives for greenfield sites—a super-tax—so that every plot on a greenfield site has to pay twice the amount as those on a

[Bob Seely]

brownfield site. Some brownfield sites are dirtier than others, but if we had a tax that said, “Okay, you are giving up 1,000 acres of greenfield site in Cambridgeshire, Kent or Hampshire, but you are getting 2,000 acres of cleaned-up brownfield site” that would be a win. That is something we could accept. We need to think in much more creative terms and to move away from an adversarial system. That is why another amendment—along with new clause 34, which we love—asks the Government to look at the creation of incentives for brownfield and greater disincentives for greenfield.

Fundamentally, with the exception of one or two things, the Government are going in the right direction, but they need to go further. Another example is the new clause on character tests. Some shoddy developers have criminal records. They intimidate people, do not treat communities properly, never build out or build poorly. Why can that not be a reason to object? Do we not want to clean up the development industry? Do we not want socially responsible developers who do the right thing for their communities and actually make an effort? They can be rewarded by us supporting their development planning applications and we can stop people who want to build caravan parks in the wrong place but use loopholes. That is another of our amendments—it is a great amendment—which would do real good, so why are the Government not accepting it?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and I, the 55 colleagues who signed new clause 21 on top-down housing targets, and many others, including the—I think—30 colleagues who signed new clause 34 on compulsory purchase, all want to say yes to this stuff. We want our communities to feel that development works for them—that it works for the old and young folks in communities, that it works to regenerate and that it works to protect our environment, which is so important to our future and which helps the whole process of community-led regeneration. In that spirit, we tabled new clause 34 and all the other wonderful amendments, which we look forward to discussing with the Government when they come up with a second date. My plea is for the Government to work with us on this issue, because want to make this a win-win, not a lose-lose.

5.30 pm

Dehenna Davison: I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions, and I put on record again my thanks to all the Members who served in Committee during the somewhat lengthy consideration of the Bill. I will endeavour to respond to the points that have arisen today, but before I do, I re-emphasise the importance that the Government place on the three interconnected themes from our debate: devolution, regeneration and levelling up. Local power exercised accountably is the only way that we will extend opportunity throughout our country. Too often, Governments have fallen into the trap of thinking that controlling more will make local areas more effective, but the lessons of the past 70 years are clear: that approach does not work and we must trust local areas with the tools to build their futures.

Let me turn to some of the individual matters that Members raised. My right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) is not yet

back in his place, but I was grateful for his incredibly passionate contribution and his rousing speech about the wonderful, unique qualities of Cornwall. I look forward to visiting Cornwall soon and to working with him and other Cornwall colleagues on progressing a deal that works for the people of Cornwall.

My right hon. Friend spoke to amendment 70, on which I point him and other concerned Members to clause 68, which would amend the statutory test so that the Secretary of State has to consider

“the economic, social and environmental well-being of some or all of the people who live or work”

in an area. That means that the impacts of devolution on an area’s community, including those identifying as belonging to a national minority, such as the Cornish, would be duly considered under social wellbeing when deciding whether the test is met. Hopefully, that provides some reassurance.

My right hon. Friend also spoke about new clause 71, on whether the framework for a tier 3 deal is accessible without a Mayor. We in the Government are committed to that framework. We believe that directly elected Mayors with a clear path of accountability and a convening power to make change happen is really important, but the key point is that there will be no imposition from Government to have a Mayor. It is for local areas to decide what tier of deal they want to access. If they do not want to access a tier 3 deal and impose a Mayor, clearly, that option is available to them. Also, if they wish to, the framework allows them to deepen devolution later at their own pace. The Government are not imposing these measures. It is for local areas to decide what will work best for them in the framework that we have set out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) is a great and passionate advocate for his constituents and his constituency. I heard loud and clear his point about Leigh station and I will raise that with colleagues at the Department for Transport. He raised the point about how a one-size-fits-all approach does not necessarily always work. That is why it is so important that we negotiate deals on a local basis, so that every deal we have is negotiated with local authorities and other local stakeholders to ensure that it will work for the local area.

My hon. Friend raised a good point about engagement with Members of Parliament. Although I am relatively new to my role, I certainly want to endeavour to do that better as we progress devolution, either in existing deals or when we look at new devolution deals in the future.

I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) for his support on devolution and on the importance of strong, accountable local leadership. I am pleased to see his gung-ho passion for rolling out Mayors across the country, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh says, not every area wants a Mayor. I do not believe that we should be imposing Mayors without local consent, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle that we do not want any areas being left behind. I am happy to engage with him and with the Northern Research Group on the question of how best to further the devolution agenda in his region and across England.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) made the crucial point that timing is vital. We need the Bill to get Royal Assent in a timely fashion to ensure

that some of the devolution deals we have agreed get over the line in time for the elections in 2024. I know that my hon. Friend recognises the incredible opportunities that a devolution deal can bring to his local residents. He spoke about the need for simpler funding; the Department is exploring the issue and will publish a funding simplification strategy in due course.

Margaret Greenwood: I am not sure whether the Minister was in the Chamber for the remarks that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) made about new clause 84, which would require the Government to make

“reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy”

one of their missions, and to set out a plan

“to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy”.

The hon. Member seems to think that the Bill makes provision for that. It does not. Does the Minister agree that addressing adult literacy is a core issue if we are to get the very best out of everybody and give everybody the opportunities they need?

Dehenna Davison: The hon. Member must have read my mind, because hers is next on my list of points to address. I am grateful for her passionate contribution on adult literacy. We all agree in this House that education is vital to levelling up, but the Bill is designed to provide a framework for the formation of missions rather than to set out the missions themselves. She will have seen in the White Paper some of the missions that we have published, which refer to educational attainment. I also point her to the Government’s work in other areas, such as funding courses for adults who do not have a level 2 English or maths qualification so that they can get those skills.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) raised several issues relating to social mobility. I was most struck by his point about inter-village transport; I face that issue in my constituency, so I can very much relate to it. Some of the devolution deals that we have negotiated and are looking to negotiate will mean more transport powers being conveyed to local areas and Mayors. That provides an opportunity for a rethink of how local transport is operated. As we spread more devolution deals around the country, that opportunity will be brought to more local areas. The hon. Member’s point has been heard loud and clear.

Jon Trickett: The Minister is making an interesting speech. I hope in due course she will come to the question that I raised about powers for parish and town councils.

Dehenna Davison: I had not planned to do so, because of the breadth of contributions that we have had today, but I am happy to write to the hon. Member on that point after the debate.

The hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) spoke to amendments 71 and 72. She is incredibly passionate about this important matter, as she has demonstrated not only today but in Committee and in other contributions. I go back to the point that I made to the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood): the Bill is designed to set out not the missions themselves, but the framework for them to exist. That is why we will not enshrine any particular missions in the Bill. *[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for South Shields and I had the same debate in Committee; I see her shaking her head, but I do not think that she is surprised by my response.

Let me very briefly address a point that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), made about the levelling-up missions. They spoke about removing the ability to amend the methodology and the matrices. I am concerned about that, not because it is some kind of cynical aim, as has been suggested, but because data will be incredibly important in assessing our success in addressing the levelling-up missions. As we get new data sources, new datasets and new ways of presenting the data, it is important that we have the flexibility to access and use the data to its maximum potential. That is why I do not agree with amendment 14.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister says that flexibility is important, so can she explain what the Government will do about the first successful bids, which are now falling short because of inflationary pressures on labour and materials?

Dehenna Davison: The hon. Member will be pleased to know that I have a note to return to that in a moment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) raised some important points. We will come to many of their amendments on the second day of Report, when they will have an opportunity to speak on them in more detail. That will be coming soon. Both Members highlighted the passion around high streets, which, as we all know across the House, are vital to the heart and soul of any community. I am grateful to them for raising new clause 34 on compulsory purchase orders. The measures already in the Bill put it beyond doubt that local authorities have the power to use compulsory purchase for regeneration processes, but we are modernising the process to make it faster and more efficient.

As I announced in Committee, we are going even further by asking the Law Commission to undertake a review and consolidation of the law on compulsory purchase and compensation, to make it more accessible and easier to understand. As part of that work, the Law Commission will review existing CPO enabling powers to ensure that they are fit for purpose, and will make recommendations where appropriate. I do not believe that the new clause is necessary; however, I put on the record my gratitude to both Members for the incredibly constructive way that they have engaged on not just this part of the Bill but all of it, particularly regarding planning and housing matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight said that I promised a visit. I am very much looking forward to visiting the Isle of Wight in due course.

Mr Betts: On the CPO powers, the Law Commission will not look at the valuations. Who will do that review work? Also, could the Minister set out very simply how the new arrangements will be simpler and quicker for local authorities to organise?

Dehenna Davison: One reason that we have asked the Law Commission to undertake the review is to ensure that we deliver in the most appropriate way, but I am

[Dehenna Davison]

happy to follow up separately with the hon. Member on hope value, because it is something that we will come to in the future.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I had a great time in Committee during the few days that I was there in my role as Minister. It was always incredibly good natured, and I thank him for that. He spoke on new clause 46, as did the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), which is on business rates reform. As both hon. Members are no doubt aware, the Government recently conducted a business rates review, and the report was published at the time of the 2021 autumn Budget. A package of reforms announced then was worth £7 billion over five years. In the autumn statement incredibly recently, the Government went even further and announced a broad range of business rates measures worth an estimated additional £13.6 billion over the next five years, including freezing the multiplier. The Chancellor of the Exchequer also announced the extension of the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme, and a transitional relief scheme for the 2023 valuation.

Helen Morgan: I appreciate the points that the Minister makes, but they are tinkering around the edges of the existing system. We are asking for root and branch review of how business rates are levied.

Dehenna Davison: While I understand the intention behind the new clause, we consider it unnecessary on the basis that a review has been concluded only recently, and we have put in place an incredibly robust support package.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the Minister for what she is saying. To add to what my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire said, there may be much to commend that particular part of the autumn statement, but is the very package not an admission that the system is broken? Tinkering on the edges will not help. Surely it needs full reform and replacement if we are to support our town and village centres.

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to the hon. Member, and indeed all colleagues who have engaged with us on business rates reform. I will not go over arguments that I have already made. We will not accept the new clause, but I hope that hon. Members recognise that we are very much committed to ensuring that business rates are not an impediment to businesses investing in and residing within our high streets.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale also spoke to new clause 45 on electoral system reform. It was no surprise to hear the Lib Dems talking about electoral reform, and I do not want to rehash debates from Committee. I know that he and his party are passionate about this subject, but he will not be surprised to learn that the Government will not accept the new clause.

Turning to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), I want to put on record my sincere praise for her campaigning on the repeal of the Vagrancy Act. She is so passionate on this issue and I am grateful to her for her positive engagement. I look forward to working with her as this progresses. On her new clause 4, I have to admit that I would not

want to make a commitment today, but I am keen to work with her to understand the issue of local voting rights in her constituency more fully. I would love to get a meeting in with her in due course to see whether this is something that we can review.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) made an impassioned case on an issue on which I know she is very passionate. It was great to find agreement with her, as we both believe in devolving power to a local level to tackle local challenges. In the White Paper we set out a skills mission which set a target to increase the number of people completing high-quality skills training in every area of the UK by 200,000, with 80,000 more people competing skills training in the lowest skilled areas of the UK. The White Paper also highlighted the importance of the Government's net zero target in helping to achieve that mission. The Government's net zero strategy also makes a commitment to ensuring that the skills system is incentivised and equipped to deliver the skills necessary for the transition to net zero, as well as a commitment to growing post-16 training programmes such as green skills boot camps, apprenticeships and T-Levels. We will not be accepting the hon. Member's amendment today, but I hope she recognises that there is a commitment from the Government, through the White Paper and other strategies, to ensure that we hit those net zero targets.

I want to make two quick final points. First, I want to say how grateful I am to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for her positive engagement on the issue of council tax for houses of multiple occupancy. We have reached a good position and I look forward to working with her and her constituent Mr Brewer throughout the consultation and beyond to ensure that we get it right.

Finally, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) raised points on the standards board and compulsory purchase orders, but I want to latch on to something he said about his belief in devolution—something that he and we in the Government absolutely share. He talked about brownfield land, and he will know about the brownfield land release fund, which has been so crucial in helping to support and regenerate brownfield areas. I would be happy to engage with him and I look forward to working with him and the Committee in my wider ministerial role.

In closing, I hope that hon. Members can see from the amendments that the Government have tabled today that we have listened to the concerns that have been raised since the Bill was introduced and that we are determined that the Bill will make a tangible difference in communities up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 61 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 62

FUNCTIONS IN RESPECT OF KEY ROUTE NETWORK ROADS

(1) The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 104, in subsection (10), for "An" substitute "Except as provided for by section 107ZA(7), an".

(3) In section 107D, in subsection (9), for "An" substitute "Except as provided for by section 107ZA(7), an".

(4) After section 107 insert—

“Combined authorities: key route network roads

107ZA Designation of key route network roads

- (1) A combined authority may designate a highway or proposed highway in its area as a key route network road, or remove its designation as a key route network road, with the consent of—
 - (a) each constituent council in whose area the highway or proposed highway is, and
 - (b) in the case of a mayoral combined authority, the mayor.
- (2) The Secretary of State may designate a highway or proposed highway in the area of a combined authority as a key route network road, or remove its designation as a key route network road, if requested to do so by—
 - (a) the combined authority,
 - (b) the mayor (if any) of the combined authority, or
 - (c) a constituent council.
- (3) A designation or removal under this section must be in writing and must state when it comes into effect.
- (4) The Secretary of State must send a copy of a designation or removal under subsection (2) to the combined authority in question at least 7 days before the date on which it comes into effect.
- (5) A combined authority must publish each designation or removal under this section of a key route network road within its area before the date on which it comes into effect.
- (6) A combined authority that has key route network roads in its area must keep a list or map (or both) accessible to the public showing those roads.
- (7) The requirements in section 104(10) and section 107D(9)(a) do not apply to provision under section 104(1)(d) and section 107D(1) contained in the same instrument so far as that provision—
 - (a) confers a power of direction on an existing mayoral combined authority regarding the exercise of an eligible power in respect of key route network roads in the area of that combined authority,
 - (b) provides for that power of direction to be exercisable only by the mayor of the combined authority, and
 - (c) is made with the consent of the mayor after the mayor has consulted the constituent councils.
- (8) When a mayor consents under subsection (7)(c), the mayor must give the Secretary of State—
 - (a) a statement by the mayor that all of the constituent councils agree to the making of the order, or
 - (b) if the mayor is unable to make that statement, the reasons why the mayor considers the order should be made even though not all of the constituent councils agree to it being made.
- (9) In this section—

“constituent council” has the meaning given in section 104(11);

“eligible power” has the meaning given by section 88(2) of the Local Transport Act 2008;

“key route network road” means a highway or proposed highway designated for the time being under this section as a key route network road;

“proposed highway” means land on which, in accordance with plans made by a highway authority, that authority are for the time being constructing or intending to construct a highway shown in the plans.”—(*Dehenna Davison.*)

This new clause provides for designation of “key route network roads” in combined authorities and makes provision about consent requirements for orders that both confer a power of direction concerning such roads and make the power exercisable only by the mayor. It will be inserted after clause 58.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 65PARTICIPATION OF POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS
AT CERTAIN LOCAL AUTHORITY COMMITTEES

In section 102(9) of the Local Government Act 1972 (appointment of committees), for “to which the commissioner is appointed in accordance with this section”, substitute “described in subsection (6)”.—(*Dehenna Davison.*)

This new clause makes clear that the restriction in section 102(9) of the Local Government Act 1972 applies only to participation at meetings of the committees described in section 102(6) of that Act. The new clause will be inserted after clause 68.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 41DUTY TO PROVIDE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO
COMBINED AUTHORITIES AND COMBINED COUNTY
AUTHORITIES

“(1) This section applies where the Government has committed funding to a Combined Authority or a Combined County Authority in order to deliver a specific project.

(2) The Secretary of State must provide commensurate financial resources to a Combined Authority or a Combined County Authority to enable the delivery of the project mentioned in subsection (1) as agreed in full.

(3) The Secretary of States must, by regulations, amend the value of this funding to reflect inflation.”—(*Alex Norris.*)

This new clause would commit the Government to fully funding combined authority and combined county authority projects they have committed to in the case that costs rise due to inflation.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 155, Noes 284.

Division No. 95]**[5.49 pm]****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxym vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Cunningham, Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Daby, Janet
Ali, Tahir	Davey, rh Ed
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	David, Wayne
Anderson, Fleur	Davies-Jones, Alex
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Debbonaire, Thangam
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Barker, Paula	Dodds, Anneliese
Beckett, rh Margaret	Duffield, Rosie
Begum, Apsana	Eagle, Dame Angela
Benn, rh Hilary	Eagle, Maria
Betts, Mr Clive	Eastwood, Colum
Blake, Olivia	Edwards, Jonathan
Blomfield, Paul	Efford, Clive
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Elliott, Julie
Brennan, Kevin	Elmore, Chris
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Eshalomi, Florence
Buck, Ms Karen	Farron, Tim
Burgon, Richard	Fletcher, Colleen
Butler, Dawn	Foord, Richard
Byrne, Ian	Fovargue, Yvonne
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Foxcroft, Vicky
Carden, Dan	Foy, Mary Kelly
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Furniss, Gill
Champion, Sarah	Gardiner, Barry
Clark, Feryal	Green, Sarah
Cooper, rh Yvette	Greenwood, Lilian
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Greenwood, Margaret
Coyle, Neil	Griffith, Dame Nia
Creasy, Stella	Haigh, Louise
Cummins, Judith	Hamilton, Fabian
	Hardy, Emma
	Harris, Carolyn

Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGinn, Conor
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah

Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Christian Wakeford and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex

Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James

Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherielyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa

Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim

Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Anderson and
Mike Wood

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 46

REVIEW INTO BUSINESS RATES SYSTEM

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must undertake a review of the business rates system.

(2) The review must consider the extent to which the business rates system—

(a) is achieving its objectives,

(b) is conducive to the achievement of the levelling-up and regeneration objectives of this Act.

(3) The review must consider whether alternatives of local business taxation would be more likely to achieve the objectives in subsections (2)(a) and (b).

(4) The review must in particular consider the effects of business rates and alternative local business taxation systems on—

(a) high streets, and

(b) rural areas.

(5) The review must consider the merits of devolving more control over local business taxation to local authorities.

(6) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a report of the review before Parliament before the end of the period of one year beginning with the day on which this Act is passed.—(*Tim Farron.*)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review the business rates system.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 159, Noes 281.

Division No. 96]

[6.4 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Farron, Tim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly

Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGinn, Conor
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte

Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John

Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Christian Wakeford and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman

Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias

Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate

Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean

Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek

Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trott, Laura
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Anderson and
Mike Wood

Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Farron, Tim
Fletcher, Colleen
Foord, Richard
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike

Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Rayner, rh Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 84

LEVELLING-UP MISSION: ADULT LITERACY

“(1) Each statement of levelling-up missions must include an objective relating to reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy.

(2) In pursuance of the objective in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must, during each mission period, review adult literacy levels in the UK, to inform measures with the purpose of reducing geographical disparities in adult literacy and eradicating illiteracy in adults.

(3) The findings of any review under this section must be published in a report, which must be laid before Parliament.

(4) When a report under this section is laid before Parliament, the government must also publish a strategy setting out steps it intends to take to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK.”—(*Margaret Greenwood.*)

This new clause would require the government to include the reducing of geographical disparities in adult literacy as one of its levelling up missions, and it would require them, during each mission period, to review levels of adult literacy in the UK, publish the findings of that review and set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 155, Noes 285.

Division No. 97]

[6.17 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula

Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen

Whittome, Nadia
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gerald Jones and
Christian Wakeford

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James

Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John

Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kearns, Alicia
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Macleane, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien

Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Swaine, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trott, Laura
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt

Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James

Williams, Craig
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:

Mike Wood and
Stuart Anderson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 4

CHANGES TO MISSION PROGRESS METHODOLOGY AND
METRICS OR TARGET DATES

Amendment proposed: 14, page 4, line 2, leave out clause 4.—(Alex Norris.)

This amendment would remove the provision allowing a Minister to make changes to mission progress methodology and metrics or target dates.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 190, Noes 285.

Division No. 98]

[6.29 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)

Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)

Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Creasy, Stella
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet

Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Owen Thompson*)
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Foord, Richard
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate

Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McLaughlin, Anne
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah

Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Rayner, rh Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Christian Wakeford and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun

Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen

Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark

Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela

Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Wood and
Stuart Anderson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 16

LOCAL AUTHORITY FUNCTIONS

Amendment made: 29, page 12, leave out lines 35 to 37 and insert—

“(4) Regulations under subsection (1) which provide for a function of a county council or a unitary district council to be exercisable by a CCA may make provision for the function to be exercisable by the CCA instead of by the county council or unitary district council.

- (4A) Regulations under subsection (1) which provide for a function of a county council or a district council to be exercisable by a CCA may make provision—*—(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment applies to regulations under clause 16(1), which may provide for a function of a county council or district council to be exercised by a combined county authority. The amendment prevents such regulations from providing for the function of a district council in a two-tier area to be exercisable by the combined county authority instead of by the district council.

Clause 20

DIRECTIONS RELATING TO HIGHWAYS AND TRAFFIC FUNCTIONS

Amendment made: 45, page 17, line 21, leave out “Regulations” and insert “Except as provided for by section (Designation of key route network roads) (7), regulations”.—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment is consequential on NC61.

Clause 27

FUNCTIONS OF MAYORS: GENERAL

Amendment made: 46, page 23, line 18, leave out “Regulations” and insert “Except as provided for by section (Designation of key route network roads) (7), regulations”.—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment is consequential on NC61.

Clause 61

PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO EXISTING COMBINED ARRANGEMENTS

Amendment made: 47, Clause 61, page 59, line 14, at end insert—

- “(12) The requirement to consult under section 113(2) of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, as amended by this section, may be satisfied by consultation before (as well as after) the passing of this Act.”—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment ensures that consultation before the Bill is passed can satisfy the requirement in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 as amended by the Bill.

Clause 155

VACANCY CONDITION

Amendments made: 40, page 176, line 16, leave out “a trespasser” and insert “—

- (a) a trespasser, or
- (b) a person living in premises that are not designed or adapted for residential use,”

This amendment means that the use of non-residential premises as living accommodation will not prevent premises from being treated as “unoccupied” for the purposes of the rental auction process.

Amendment 41, page 176, line 22, after “involves the” insert “use of the premises for activity that—

- (a) is substantial,
- (b) is sustained, and
- (c) involves the.”—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment requires premises to be used for activity that is substantial and sustained (as well as involving the regular presence of people) for the premises not to be treated as “unoccupied” for the purposes of the rental auction process.

Clause 159

CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH LETTING TO BE PERMITTED

Amendment made: 42, page 178, line 6, leave out from “for” to end of line 7 and insert “a high-street use.”—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment limits the duty of a local authority to allow letting by the landlord once the rental auction process has started to cases where letting is proposed for a high-street use.

Clause 165

RENTAL AUCTIONS

Amendment made: 43, page 181, line 21, leave out “and” and insert—

- “(aa) it is no longer possible for that notice to be revoked on appeal (whether because of the expiry of the period referred to in section 163(2) or 164(4) or the final determination, withdrawal or abandonment of an appeal), and”.—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment prevents the rental auction process from being initiated while an appeal remains possible.

Clause 166

POWER TO CONTRACT FOR TENANCY

Amendment made: 44, page 182, line 28, at end insert “(including a contract under which those things are agreed subject to conditions)”—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

This amendment makes it clear that a tenancy contract entered into under Part 8 can be conditional (so, for instance, that the tenancy would only be proceeded with if certain works were carried out).

Clause 190

VAGRANCY AND BEGGING

Amendment made: 1, page 196, line 16, leave out clause 190.—*(Dehenna Davison.)*

Bill to be further considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Finance Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—*(Fay Jones.)*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

TRANSPORT AND WORKS

That the draft Transport and Works (Guided Transport Modes) (Amendment) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 24 October, be approved.—*(Fay Jones.)*

Question agreed to.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)

6.41 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): On 19 June 2021, the Stoke-on-Trent North, Kids Grove and Talke community was rocked when it learned of the tragic death of six-year-old Sharlotte-Sky. Sharlotte was killed when John Owen hit her with his car on Endon Road in Norton Green on that fateful day. John Owen was twice over the drink-drive limit, had a series of drugs in his system, was using a mobile phone, had no seatbelt on, and was speeding. Sharlotte was on the pavement with her father, who was also struck. She was on the way to get some sweets for a girls' night with her mother. This unforgivable and selfish act has taken away a precious young life, left a family broken and scarred a community. It was an event that shocked the entire city of Stoke-on-Trent, with hundreds of people lining the streets for Sharlotte's funeral in an outpouring of profound grief.

Since that horrific night, I have been working with Sharlotte's brave and inspiring mother, Claire Reynolds—she is in the Public Gallery alongside Sharlotte's grandfather—*The Sentinel* and her friends to get the justice they rightfully deserve. Before I speak about why I join Claire and the Stoke-on-Trent community in wanting Mr Owen's sentence increased so that justice can rightfully be served, I want to take a moment to promote the idea of Sharlotte's law.

Mr Owen caused much distress by prolonging the investigation into Sharlotte's death, to exploit, in my opinion, loopholes in our justice system. Mr Owen was in a coma when the investigation began, and the law brought about significant problems. Legally, blood samples can be taken without a suspect's consent yet not subject to a test until consent is given. Therefore, in such situations, the investigation is delayed until consent is received. The current law addressing that is section 7A of the Road Traffic Act 1988. Subsection (4) outlines three criteria that must be met to test a blood sample, one of which is the person providing their consent.

I understand from subsection (6) that

“A person who...fails to give his permission for a laboratory test of a specimen of blood”

without a reasonable excuse is, under section 7A, “guilty of an offence.”

It therefore seems that consent is simply a formality. Effectively, anything other than providing permission would constitute an offence. The law protracted the investigation into Mr Owen and caused knock-on delays in moving the case forward. Claire has been so brave, sharing her struggles with not just me but the local press, too. She has been battling her own mental health problems that have no doubt been exacerbated by the delays and issues brought about by this law.

It seems simple to me. If we are to free up police time and resources, testing blood samples should be happening regardless of consent, in order to get answers. If a suspect has nothing to fear, why would they object to testing? Claire is adamant and defiant that Sharlotte's death and the torment her family went through will not

be for nothing. She wants to see the consent law scrapped where loss of life has occurred due to a collision with a motor vehicle.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his assiduousness in looking after his constituents. He has done that since he first came to this place and he continues to do so. I fully and wholeheartedly support what he puts forward. When it comes to justice and victims, the victims should be the priority. Those who are guilty, even at an early stage, of not giving a blood sample should be advised that there is no other option—they must give it. Does he agree?

Jonathan Gullis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I could not agree with him more and I thank him for his kind words. I have rehearsed this speech a few times, hoping not to get teary. It is quite difficult. He is right that people should not fear the law if they have not done anything wrong. A six-year-old should not have lost her life. Worst of all, she should not have had her killer sentenced to only two and a half years in prison. That is not justice.

I have pursued this disparity in the law with parliamentary colleagues and raised it in the House multiple times. I have met officials and made a submission to the Department for Transport's call for evidence on drug driving. I am seeking support from Ministers to implement Sharlotte's law. Obviously, I will cheekily use this opportunity to see if the Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), will add his name to that call.

The main purpose for holding this debate today is to consider the unduly lenient sentence scheme. On 4 October 2022, John Owen was sentenced to six years and four months in prison, with the most shocking revelation being that Mr Owen would only spend two and a half years behind bars. Considering that Judge Glenn told Mr Owen that he was

“an accident waiting to happen”,

that rubs salt into the wounds of Sharlotte's family. The whole north Staffordshire community, myself and most importantly Claire and Sharlotte's family are rightly outraged at this insultingly lenient sentence, which means that John Owen will have served less time than the young life he has taken.

With Claire's support, I wrote to the Attorney General, who at the time was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), to seek to have the sentence challenged as part of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. Regrettably, the initial response I received from the Solicitor General failed to answer some of the questions I raised about the insulting sentencing of John Owen. I therefore re-wrote to the now Attorney General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), seeking clarification on several points.

On researching sentences for deaths by dangerous driving, I uncovered that there are categories that judges use as a guideline to determine for how long an offender is sentenced. While Judge Glenn correctly placed Mr Owen in category 1, the highest and most serious category, it is incredibly disappointing that the sentence passed is at the lower end of the spectrum. Category 1 is anywhere between eight and 14 years. Judge Glenn sentenced Sharlotte's killer to nine and a half years, before giving

a third off to Mr Owen, who had, by some cold legal definition, given a guilty plea at the “earliest opportunity”. In reality, he had exhausted scapegoating the idea he was unfit to stand trial.

After my meeting with the Solicitor General, it became clearer that the sentence could have been higher if the following “aggravating factors” had been involved: multiple deaths; if the vehicle was stolen; if the driver had a previous history of bad driving; or if the driver fled the scene. In Charlotte’s case, none of those applies. However, if John Owen having been drinking and on drugs does not act as a severe aggravating factor, and display a complete disregard for others’ lives and a willingness selfishly to endanger life such that a six-year-old girl was killed as she walked along the pavement in her home village of Norton Green, victims like Claire will continue to be failed by our justice system.

It is well documented from John Owen’s friends that he was drinking earlier on in the day and chose to get in the car, with complete contempt for life. That sheer selfishness should be an aggravating factor. It demonstrates that, despite his friends’ protests, he neglected the fact that he was not fit to drive and made an active choice to get behind the wheel. The devastating fact is that he simply did not care and then went on to kill a beautiful young girl.

Jim Shannon: It is fairly obvious to everyone in the House that this is a very difficult experience for the hon. Gentleman and for the family, who are in the Gallery. I suspect that he is seeking a change to ensure that the law is sufficient when it comes to a blood test. He referred to aggravation and how the person disregarded the family and their feelings. We in this House unite with our friend and colleague to fully support him and what he proposes. In particular, on behalf of the family, who are here, I salute him—well done.

Jonathan Gullis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. The impact of Charlotte’s death is impossible to overestimate. I have already explained the deeply saddening impact that it has had on Charlotte’s immediate family. However, it has also had a huge effect on the local community.

The killing of an innocent child in such tragic circumstances comes with a set of exceptional impacts on the children around Charlotte, which are unlikely to be felt in cases not involving the death of a child. Charlotte’s classmates and children in the local community have been left with lasting effects, to the point where some have required specialist counselling and have been left scared to walk at the sides of busy roads. Charlotte’s death will stay with these children long into adulthood, and I am staggered that that would not also have been considered as part of the sentencing.

In addition, I raised the legal ambiguities surrounding John Owen’s guilty plea. Mr Owen pleaded guilty long after he killed Charlotte, in May 2022, when the report came back and demonstrated overwhelming evidence against him, including that he was under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Mr Owen did not plead guilty until that report was produced; he could have done that far earlier. Legally, he pleaded guilty at the “earliest possible” moment, but given the lengthy delay and ample opportunity, I do not believe that that should entitle him to the whole one-third reduction in his

sentence. I feel the law should consider that with more nuance. It is totally different to plead guilty as soon as possible compared with as soon as “legally possible”.

By definition, the unduly lenient sentence scheme allows the Attorney General to refer a sentence to the Court of Appeal if it is too low. However, it appears that the scheme is practically useless if a case such as this one cannot be at least reviewed. The parameters to get a case reviewed by the Court of Appeal must be extraordinary. That, for me, brings into question the relevance of the scheme. I must ask: what is the point of it, considering that, as a Member of Parliament, I cannot help to get this truly harrowing miscarriage of justice at least appealed? Claire and I were no less than astonished by the Attorney General’s response, which ignored all my further questions. It feels as though the legal system did not care that a mother and a whole community felt completely let down by the law that is supposed to protect them.

To touch on the local actions following Charlotte’s death, those should serve as an example to the Attorney General about how things must be adapted in response to such an emotive case. Local ward councillors for the area, such as Councillor Dave Evans and Councillor Carl Edwards, have been pushing for traffic-calming measures on Endon Road for many years. It is tragic that it has taken the death of a six-year-old girl for there to be a signalised pedestrian crossing, intermittent speed humps and more markings, but it shows a fundamental recognition that changes were needed following this tragedy—a concept that I advise the Attorney General and the Government to think about. Councillors are also pushing for a weight limit on the road to stop the HGV rat run; I hope that Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council can work together to agree on that limit as soon as possible. I would like personally to thank Councillor Carl Edwards, Councillor Dave Evans, Norton Green Residents Association and the local community for their hard work in pushing for road safety in the area.

I am grateful for the Solicitor General agreeing to meet me, following our correspondence, and pleased that our meeting was constructive. During the meeting, he and I discussed gross errors. In legal terms, a gross error is when a judge incorrectly misapplies the law, for example by placing a defendant in the wrong category. Understandably, the Solicitor General argued that the case could not be referred to the Court of Appeal because no gross error had been made. That effectively means that if a judge puts a defendant in the right category, there is no way to argue that the sentence is too lenient.

I believe that that is far too simplistic. It fails to consider that a category 1 sentence can range from eight to 14 years—a substantial difference that would have had a huge impact on the perception of the case. If, for example, the case had been referred to the Court of Appeal and John Owen’s sentence had been extended to the maximum 14 years, it would be perceived to be far more rigorous. However, because the gross error clause only allows cases in the wrong category to be referred, we were unable to bring Charlotte’s killer to the real justice that he deserves.

It was a huge disappointment to hear that, especially considering that the Solicitor General and I both voted for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022,

[Jonathan Gullis]

which takes a more robust approach to causing death by dangerous driving—indeed, it extends the maximum sentence way above 14 years. In my view, this sentence undermines the Act's more rigorous stance on causing death by dangerous driving. Although I accept that that cannot be retrospectively applied to Mr Owen, it does not deter those who might think it sensible to get in their car under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

The experience also raises obvious questions about the application of the new law by judges. If Judge Glenn arrived at this insulting sentence within the current parameters, I am not at all confident that a similar sentence would not be issued even under the changes that we have made in this House. I was hugely grateful to the Lord Chancellor for agreeing at Justice questions yesterday to meet Claire and me to discuss sentencing guidelines and try to ensure no other family feels let down by the justice system again.

Ultimately, it is without question that the difficulties that Claire has had in bringing the killer of her six-year-old daughter to justice are wholly unacceptable. There are significant nuances in the law that allowed Mr Owen to prolong the case significantly, yet unnecessarily. That meant that the case dragged on for too long, which has had devastating consequences for Claire and her family. More importantly, it is still my view and that of the Stoke-on-Trent community that John Owen's sentence is shockingly lenient, considering what he did. The law clearly works in favour of the killer, not the victim—that is the message that I am hearing in the streets of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. As I said, John Owen is likely to spend only two and a half years in prison. That is simply nowhere near enough time behind bars, considering the consequences of his selfishness.

For all the nuanced, sophisticated legal arguments that the Solicitor General is forced to put forward, it is impossible to ignore the real consequences of what John Owen did on that day in June last year. After consuming far too much alcohol to drive, along with cocaine, he recklessly and selfishly decided that the law did not apply to him and got in his car. By taking that demonstrably thoughtless decision, he killed an innocent six-year-old girl. In my mind, that is one of the worst crimes imaginable.

Over the past year, Claire's courage in the face of unimaginable adversity has been humbling. She will not stop until the man who killed her daughter is punished properly for the abhorrent crime that he committed. I will join her in that fight, on every step of the way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Solicitor General. I will have to interrupt him in about one minute to move the Adjournment again.

6.59 pm

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): Thank you for the warning, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing this very important debate. I particularly thank him for raising the very difficult case of his constituent Sharlotte, who was tragically killed by the abhorrent driving of John Owen while she was walking on the pavement—a place where

she was entitled to feel safe. I pay tribute to the family of Sharlotte, and particularly to her mother, Claire Reynolds. I agree with my hon. Friend that she has shown unwavering bravery and conviction in the fight for justice.

Driving dangerously and under the influence of drink and drugs is a most serious offence, which is resoundingly condemned by all in this House. Before I pick up on some of the specific points that my hon. Friend made, let me set out some of the general principles of the unduly lenient sentence scheme, known as the ULS scheme.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jo Churchill.)

The Solicitor General: My role and that of the Attorney General is to act as guardians of the public interest. In exercising our functions, we act quasi-judicially in the public interest and independently of Government. I share the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North to ensure that those responsible for terrible crimes are properly punished. In the vast majority of cases, sentencing judges get it right. They deal with a huge variety of cases that vary in complexity and severity, and I commend them for their work. Thousands of cases are dealt with in the Crown court each year, and a similar number of sentences are imposed. In 2021, 151 cases were referred to the Court of Appeal under the ULS scheme, and sentences were increased in 106 cases. That is a rate of 70%.

The ULS scheme, as my hon. Friend mentioned, is intended to promote justice, fairness and consistency. It allows sentences that are too low to be increased, and is there to correct an error when judges get it wrong. Cases can, however, be referred to the Court of Appeal only if all three of the following conditions are satisfied. First, the offence must be within the ULS scheme. Secondly, the application must be lodged within 28 days. Thirdly, it must appear to the Attorney General or I that the sentence is not just lenient but unduly lenient. Of course, not all offences come within the scheme. It is reserved for those offences that are the most serious, such as murder, rape, robbery and causing death by dangerous driving. It has been extended over recent years.

Let me turn specifically to the offence of causing death by dangerous driving, and pick up some of the more specific points that my hon. Friend mentioned. First, he made an important point about a discount for a guilty plea. Sentencing Council guidelines rightly encourage a defendant to accept responsibility and avoid the need for a trial. If there were no reduction for a guilty plea, there would be little incentive to plead guilty, and a defendant may as well just have a trial. That would cause more anxiety to witnesses, victims and their families, and would act as a disincentive to pleading guilty. We must, however, get the balance right—hence there is a process to encourage an early guilty plea.

As my hon. Friend said, the reduction is applied on a sliding scale from one third, with the largest discounts for cases where a defendant pleads guilty at the earliest opportunity. I heard loud and clear what my hon. Friend said, and I know that his campaign on this point

will continue, but there may be occasions where the first opportunity legally is not the very first appearance in court. It may occur later in proceedings.

My hon. Friend asked when a case can be referred to the Court of Appeal. It is important to note that, as he rightly said, the ULS scheme applies only to sentences that are unduly lenient, not to sentences that are simply lenient. The test is a high one. Parliament intended that the Court of Appeal will grant permission to refer a sentence only in exceptional circumstances, as he said—for example, if the judge has passed a sentence that falls outside the range of sentences that a judge could properly consider appropriate, or if there has been a gross error in law.

I must pay tribute to the invaluable work of the Sentencing Council for its development of sentencing guidelines that assist judges in deciding just and proportionate sentences. On the categorisation in those guidelines, my hon. Friend rightly said that level 1 is for the most serious offences, and encompasses driving that involves a deliberate decision to ignore, or a flagrant disregard for, the rules of the road. Level 2 is less serious and is for driving that has created a substantial risk of danger. As my hon. Friend said, for an offence committed, importantly, before 28 June this year, the starting point for a level 1 offence is eight years in custody, with a range of seven to 14 years.

As my hon. Friend has rightly mentioned, aggravating and mitigating factors must be considered. Once a provisional sentence is arrived at, the court is required to take into account factors that might make an offence more serious, and that is quite right—they are called aggravating features—but it must also consider factors that might reduce the seriousness of the offence or reflect personal mitigation. Those are mitigating factors. Different aggravating and mitigating factors will apply in every case and it is for the court to decide what weight to place on those sentences.

My hon. Friend has rightly said that sentences for the very top end of the scale are reserved for particularly egregious offences and he mentioned some of the particular factors that are aggravating. According to the guidelines, they include previous convictions for motoring offences, and more than one person being killed as a result of the event. Every death on the road is a tragedy but there is a scale, and it is right that when more than one death occurs, that should be reflected in the sentence. That is an aggravating feature, as is serious injury to one or more victims. I will mention just two more: other offences being committed at the same time, such as driving without a licence; and driving off in an attempt to avoid

detection or apprehension. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words about our constructive meeting on some of these detailed points.

In terms of recent reforms, our laws must strongly signal that causing death by dangerous driving will not be tolerated. I know that, recognising a trend of inadequate sentences for causing death by dangerous driving, my hon. Friend warmly welcomed and fully supported the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. He rightly said that it increases the maximum sentence from 14 years imprisonment to life imprisonment. Of course, that is only for offences committed after 28 June, when the Act comes into force, and he is absolutely right to say that it cannot be applied retrospectively.

I know that my hon. Friend is committed to tackling drivers under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and to ensuring that all such drivers are caught and punished. The Government are too. First, we have increased the maximum penalties for causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink or drugs. Secondly, we have changed the law to increase the maximum period of imprisonment and the minimum driver disqualification period for those who commit the most serious road traffic offences, ensuring that they are kept off our roads for longer periods. I know that my hon. Friend is also aware of the Department for Transport's call for evidence relating to drug driving, which closed in June. This combined approach of tough penalties and rigorous enforcement reinforces the social unacceptability of drink and drug driving, and reminds people of the very serious consequences.

I am seriously grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate. The ULS scheme is not shrouded in mystery, and nor should it be, but it is not often that we have the opportunity to debate the scheme in any detail and I am grateful to him for providing this opportunity. I am also grateful to his constituents, and I acknowledge their courage in allowing Charlotte's case to be highlighted. I know personally how difficult it is for family members to come to Parliament after such a tragic event, and I know the toll that even this debate will be taking, but as my hon. Friend continues his campaign, it may be at least some little comfort to know that Charlotte's tragic case will help to highlight the scourge of dangerous driving and has helped to make a difference through my hon. Friend's campaign and the increase in sentencing in the 2022 Act. Charlotte's memory will continue to have a positive impact in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.8 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 November 2022

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Social Security Support for Children

9.30 am

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social security support for children.

This is the first Westminster Hall debate that I have successfully secured, and I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am also delighted to see my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), next to me; it would not be a Westminster Hall debate if he was not here.

I am here to be the voice of the voiceless. This is a debate on social security support for children. The Tory Government came into power at Westminster in 2010, and at that point the use of food banks across all four nations was negligible. The Trussell Trust had around 35 food banks at that point, but in 2022 it estimates that it has around 1,400. That is an increase of almost 4,000%.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In the last six months, 320,000 people have had to use a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the first time. Research found that one in five referrals was for working households. Does the hon. Member share my concern that the lack of support for working families is pushing the burden away from the Government and on to charities?

Ms Qaisar: It is as if the hon. Member has seen my speech; I will come to that point later.

Of course, it is not only the Trussell Trust; there are a number of independent and locally run food poverty groups. In my constituency, for example, we have Paul's Parcels, which serves Shotts and the surrounding villages. We are living in food bank Britain, where almost 1 million children receive some sort of help from food banks. The Food Foundation also found that around 4 million children have experienced food insecurity in the past month. Some people will argue that there has been an increase in food bank use due to wider awareness, but I would argue that consecutive Conservative Governments are the reason for that increase. It is their financial mismanagement of the economy, and now austerity 2.0, as set out in the Chancellor's autumn statement, that are pushing people further and further into poverty.

We face the reality that there are more food banks than McDonald's in the UK. The richest MP in the House of Commons double-jobs as the Prime Minister. Rather than extending a lifeline to the average punter in the street, the Government are handing out bankers' bonuses. Who benefits and, crucially, who are the losers? Many groups are victims of the financial mismanagement of the three Prime Ministers and four Chancellors just

this year. My concern is for children and young people. They are largely voiceless and are rarely actively involved in the decision-making process.

In Scotland, we have a completely different approach to target help for children. It starts from the basic notion of referring to benefits as social security. In 2021, the SNP Scottish Government introduced the Scottish child payment, which is a groundbreaking piece of policy. Since then, the payment has doubled in value to £20, and on 14 November 2022 it automatically increased to £25 per week for those already in receipt of it. Based on March 2022 modelling, that increased payment is estimated to lift 50,000 children out of poverty and reduce relative child poverty by 5 percentage points.

That is a phenomenal piece of legislation, and I am so proud of it. Many Members here might argue, "Anum, you're biased; you're an SNP MP, and that's the SNP Scottish Government." However, that is not just my belief. Chris Birt, associate director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, said:

"The full rollout of the Scottish Child Payment is a watershed moment for tackling poverty in Scotland, and the rest of the UK should take notice."

Will the UK Government do so? In fact, would the Minister care to intervene and announce that they are following the Scottish Government's lead? No, he is furiously writing away. When he replies, I hope he will announce that the Scottish child payment is being implemented across the UK.

That is where the issue lies: the SNP Scottish Government consider social security as an investment in people that is key to their national mission to tackle child poverty. We do that with the limited economic levers that the Scottish Parliament holds.

The Scottish Government have implemented a number of other policies. I will go through them and ask whether the UK Government will commit to follow suit. The Scottish Government are offering free school lunches in term time to all 281,865 pupils in primary 1 to 5 and in additional support needs schools. That saves families an average of £400 per child per year. That will be extended to primary 6 and 7 during the Parliament. Will the UK Government follow suit?

The Scottish Government are massively expanding the provision of fully funded high-quality early learning in childcare. They are providing 1,140 hours per year for eligible children aged two, three and four. In fact, if eligible families were to purchase the funded childcare provided by the Scottish Government, it would cost them about £5,000 per eligible child per year. Again, will the UK Government follow suit?

The Scottish Government have increased the school clothing grant to at least £128 for every eligible primary school pupil and £150 for every eligible secondary school pupil from the start of the 2021-22 academic year. Again, will the UK Government follow suit?

The Scottish Government are bringing forward those policies with the limited economic levers that they hold.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I declare an interest as a massive fan of my hon. Friend's constituency—if not the Shotts part, then certainly the Airdrie part. I commend her for securing the debate, and I want to back up the point she is making. Although the Scottish Government are doing a huge amount of

[David Linden]

incredibly ambitious things to tackle the scourge of child poverty, 85% of welfare spending remains under the control of this institution. Does she, like me, believe that it is absolutely abhorrent that, under the devolution settlement, the Scottish Government have to use their devolved budget, which would normally be used on things such as trying to reduce class sizes, to try to plug the gaps in an inadequate state support system that is the result of a Conservative Government—something that people in Scotland have not voted for since the 1950s?

Ms Qaisar: My hon. Friend's point is incredibly valid. The Scottish Government hold limited economic levers, but they often have to use their budget to mitigate Tory austerity.

In debating topics such as social security for children, it is essential to reaffirm that a societal approach must be considered when formulating policy. Social security for children is about so much more than targeted support. We must consider what support is in place for parents. This week, I had the pleasure of meeting Lauren from *Pregnant Then Screwed*, which has revealed some harrowing statistics. Out of 1,630 women it interviewed who had had an abortion in the past five years, 60.5% said that the cost of childcare influenced their decision, and 17.4% said that childcare costs were the main reason for their decision. A separate survey found that 48% of pregnant mothers have to cut their maternity leave short due to financial hardship. Those are not simply statistics; that is the reality for many women.

In Scotland, childcare and policies relating to children are seen as lifelong investments for society. It has been said before that an investment in our children is an investment in our future, and I wholeheartedly stand by that. It is crucial that the UK Government take a societal approach to social security for children. The wider economic implications of child poverty are significant, with a 2021 study estimating the cost of child poverty in the UK at £38 billion a year.

There is a cost to not addressing child poverty, and I am not just talking about the direct financial implications. We face the harsh reality of children who are upset and anxious as a result of their parents worrying about household finances. That is not the type of society that I wish to live in.

In Scotland, different policies have been introduced. For example, before a baby is born, the Scottish Government provide expectant families with a baby box. Baby boxes include essentials for bringing up a child, such as clothing and digital thermometers. That not only provides essentials at a time that can, in any case, be physically, emotionally and financially challenging; it sends a clear message to families that the state cares about them. Some 93% of Scots who are eligible have taken up the scheme. Ireland has a pilot scheme, and the baby box has been hailed internationally. The UK Government would do well to mirror that approach, and if the Minister cannot commit today to introducing the baby box, I hope he will take the information on board and give it serious consideration.

We know that parents are having to make unimaginable financial decisions—to return to work early or to leave their jobs altogether if they cannot afford the cost of

childcare. We know, too, that the cost of child poverty can disproportionately impact women. Typically, women assume the main role as caregiver and are the first to give up their jobs when childcare becomes unaffordable. The Scottish Government are massively expanding the provision of fully funded, high-quality early learning and childcare, providing 1,140 hours a year for eligible children aged two, three and four. In Scotland, we have we have taken a different path—one that puts children and families first, with lifeline policies providing help to those who need it most.

Over the past 12 years, the Tories have systematically dismantled the social security system. It is clear that the Tory-run system is not designed to help those in need. Rather, it pushes a poverty-inducing austerity agenda. I have described what the Scottish Government are doing to reduce the harmful impact of Tory austerity-driven Government, but the reality is that 85% of social security expenditure remains reserved to Westminster, so the change that is desperately needed must start here.

We are at a point at which meaningful and tangible policy can be implemented to make a difference to millions of children and families, and it is an active policy decision not to make those changes. That is costing all of society financially and socially. The limitations imposed on social security by the Tory Government are sickening. The freezing of the benefit cap since 2016 has disproportionately impacted lone-parent families, the majority of whom are women, as well as larger families and ethnic minority families. Official Department for Work and Pensions statistics have shown that more than 100,000 households have had their benefits capped since May 2022. Of that number, 87% are households that include children.

There is much that we could do to help families that are struggling. The Tory Government could start by looking at social security as an investment in society and future generations, rather than something that needs to be cut and limited. There are many clear ways to do that. First, the Minister could commit to removing the abhorrent two-child limit on universal credit and legacy benefits, as well as ending the benefit cap, which would lift 300,000 children out of poverty. My SNP colleagues and I have been campaigning tirelessly to eradicate that regressive measure, and we will continue to push for it to be removed.

The Government could do more than simply remove the cap. Following the Chancellor's recent fiscal statement, the Child Poverty Action Group has reported that, even with the uprating of benefits in line with inflation, families will be worse off in 2023-24 than they were after universal credit was cut last year. That weak attempt to reverse 12 years of austerity will have a marginal impact on children, as the entire UK Government's social security system is in desperate need of an overhaul.

Other fundamental issues with universal credit impact children. Policies such as a five-week wait for first payments, the bedroom tax and the cruel sanctions regime all push families on universal credit towards destitution. If we reversed the policies introduced by the Tory Government since 2015, we would lift 30,000 children in Scotland out of poverty by 2024.

It is not the job of food banks and charities to uphold a crumbling social security system. I am honoured to represent the constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, which

has dedicated community organisations. Since my election last year, I have worked tirelessly and closely with many organisations to support them in delivering an essential lifeline to constituents who face destitution as a result of Tory-made austerity.

The cost of living crisis is disproportionately impacting children, with families having to cut back on both essential and luxury items. In this festive period I am working alongside four constituency-based organisations: Paul's Parcels, Diamonds in the Community, Airdrie food bank and Airdrie community school uniform bank. We are asking people to donate advent calendars for the four organisations to deliver across the constituency. A simple item such as an advent calendar is unaffordable. Sadly, many children will not enjoy the typical Christmas festivities, because their parents or carers cannot afford simple luxuries.

In my contribution I have outlined a number of asks, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I imagine that there will not be much in the way of concessions, but I hope he will sincerely take on board the approach of the SNP Scottish Government and consider following suit.

9.47 am

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on securing this important debate.

At this time of year it is natural for people's minds to turn towards Christmas. I am sure that the Minister, like many of us, is looking forward to a well-earned break, the company of family and friends, and all the comforts and trappings of the season. But I must warn him that, for the more than one in five children in my constituency who live in poverty, the coming festive season holds none of the joy that he surely takes for granted. Indeed, for many of the children that I represent, 25 December threatens to be a day like any other—plagued by cold, hunger and fear.

Our multimillionaire Prime Minister has at least had the sense to look beyond the walls of his country mansion and acknowledge the crisis facing millions of ordinary people this winter. Addressing the Cabinet yesterday, he is reported to have said that we are entering “a challenging period for the country, caused by the aftershocks of the global pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.”

But he is deluding himself if he believes that he can ignore the central role that the Conservative party has played in making this crisis. Even before the pandemic began, nearly 4 million British children were growing up in poverty, 75% of whom live in a household with at least one working parent. While the fallout of Putin's war is hitting all of Europe's major economies hard, none is being forced to grapple with the depth of deprivation we now see in the UK. That is a distinctly British ailment.

A quarter of a century ago, a Labour Government set out on a moral crusade to end poverty. They recognised that spending formative years in poverty is the single most important determinant of life chances in everything from educational outcomes to life expectancy. That is why, when Labour was in power, we lifted 1 million children out of poverty, which is an historic achievement. However, today we bear witness to scenes of destitution

and misery that we thought were a thing of the past. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown has recently said that he is now seeing more children going hungry than at any time in his 40 years in public life.

Margaret Ferrier: Many of the support measures announced in last week's Budget were temporary, but long-term support is required if we are going to provide all children with the best start in life. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government need to review this urgently?

Mick Whitley: The hon. Member makes a good point. We hope that the Government will take cognisance of what we are saying today.

What the former Prime Minister has said is a stark indictment of 12 years of Tory failures. When the Minister launches his inevitable feeble defence of the Government's record in a few moments' time, he will undoubtedly point to the measures contained in last week's Budget. It is true that after weeks of equivocation, the Chancellor has at last bowed to pressure and agreed to an uplift in the benefit cap and benefit payments, but for the thousands of young people in my constituency for whom poverty has become a fact of life, it is nowhere near enough. After 12 years of real-terms cuts to benefits and punitive sanctions, the idea that they should be in any way grateful to the Chancellor for the limited action he has taken is an insult.

The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that while benefits will be 14% higher in the next fiscal year, prices will be 21% higher for the poorest families in towns such as mine, and although a lifting of the benefit cap is long overdue it fails to even begin to undo the damage that has been wrought as a result of it being frozen in 2016. In fact, in communities such as Birkenhead, it would need to increase by a further £942 a month just to erase what has been lost since 2013, but still the Chancellor has the temerity to patronise hard-working families by saying that the best way out of poverty is through work. I want the Minister to know that most of the struggling families that I meet work harder and longer hours than either of us; the reason they are claiming benefits at all is the scourge of poverty pay.

Last week, the Chancellor spoke of the need to treat the vulnerable with compassion, but a truly compassionate Government would recognise that the benefit cap, the two-child limit and the pernicious sanctions are just not working. They are trapping millions of our most vulnerable citizens—our young people—in poverty. Things cannot go on like this. For 12 long years, this Government have pursued a policy of slashing benefits, squeezing families, and inflicting punitive sanctions that drive people past the point of desperation. The result is that the hard-won progress we made in tackling child poverty between 1997 and 2010 has been almost entirely undone. That is a public policy failure almost without precedent. An entire generation of young people who have known only poverty and misery under a Tory Government is about to come of age; we cannot allow more to follow.

9.53 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to speak in today's debate, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) for securing it, and congratulate her on her

[*Jim Shannon*]

first Westminster Hall debate—I am convinced that it will not be her last, and we look forward to her future contributions.

I was very impressed by the hon. Lady's contribution today, which laid out the strategy of the Scottish Government and the work they have done outside this place for their own people. One cannot fail to be impressed by the clear commitment that the Scottish Government have to supporting children. The summary that the hon. Lady gave was illuminating and helpful; it is a guide for us in other regions across the United Kingdom to take note of, as I often do. I am a great believer in noting things that are done well in one region and taking them on board in my own region, and if we do something well, I like to share that. I know the Minister is of the same opinion.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place, as he knows—I have said so to my colleagues this morning. I always look forward to his contributions and his answers; I think he understands the points that we are trying to put forward, and hopefully from that understanding will come the answers that we seek. I am sure the Minister will tell us what has been done for children and social security across the United Kingdom. I want to replicate the contribution of the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts from a Northern Ireland perspective; many of the things that she mentioned are happening in my constituency as well, as I will illustrate.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts is right that the cost of living crisis is having a knock-on effect on children's development. With the rising cost of electricity, oil, foodstuffs and school items such as uniforms and school meals, parents are struggling to make ends meet each month. That is greatly impacting parents and children. Social security services across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a role to play in ensuring that children are given the best start in life. It is great to be able to discuss those matters.

We all recognise that families are struggling. I do; I see it in my office every day. I find it distressing to see a family in need, or to see a mother distressed over her children and how to make ends meet. For me, the question is how we help. I know that that is also how the Minister will respond: how can we help? What can we do?

Society is often marked, and should be marked, by its attitude to those in need. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts referred to being a "voice of the voiceless". That is what I want to be as well: a voice for the voiceless—for those who do not have the opportunity to come to Westminster but expect their MP to come for them. I am happy to do that.

Increasing numbers of families are truly struggling through this winter. In my office, I have seen large numbers of families seeking assistance from food banks. I am always encouraged—I say this respectfully—that the first food bank in Northern Ireland was in Newtownards, in my constituency of Strangford: the Thriving Life Church food bank. We do between 20 and 25 referrals to the food bank every week, so we get a fair perspective on who is coming to the office.

The manager of the food bank tells me that he foresees that this winter will be the hardest ever, and that is after 10 or 12 years of the food bank being in my constituency. It is not just the working class—I use that

terminology to describe, rather than anything else—who come to the food bank. The working class will probably always be there, but the manager tells me that he now sees the middle class coming. I see that all the time. I see those who are squeezed by their mortgages and car repayments, who are living on a fine budget. They do not live in luxury, but they have a standard of living that they wish to have. They are being impacted, and I see that more than ever.

Almost all the families who come to my office have young children of school age. People want to do the best for their children. That is what a father and mum do, and it is what we have done all our lives. Reports have shown that Northern Ireland has the worst poverty rates, including for child poverty, in the United Kingdom. One in four children—24%, or around 95,000—are growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland. A massive two thirds of that group are growing up in families where parents are working. Some 12% are in absolute poverty, which means exactly that: absolute. People face situations that they never thought they would face. They need help from food banks, churches and their families: mums and dads, grannies and grandas, and probably uncles and aunts will step in to help out as well.

That highlights how dire the situation is. Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane are among the places with the highest volumes of child poverty in Northern Ireland at over 26%. The average for Northern Ireland is 17%, so in those areas it is even worse. Social security plays a crucial part in assisting people in Northern Ireland, especially families. Child maintenance is proven to help children's wellbeing and the quality of family relationships. The parent who is not responsible for day-to-day care—the paying parent—pays child maintenance to the parent or the person who does: the receiving parent. Single parenting is a major factor in explaining why families are suffering. Looking after children as a single parent can be quite a challenge when one's income has not increased along with inflation.

In addition, universal credit is a widely used benefit that assists in living costs for those on low incomes. One of the girls in my office deals with nothing but benefit issues, because of the magnitude of the issue. That is a five-day week on universal credit, employment and support allowance, personal independence payments, disability living allowance, income support and even housing benefit.

David Linden: I know, having visited the hon. Gentleman in his constituency office in Newtownards last Easter, just how hard the staff in his office work. Does he agree with me that, even though we are in a crisis moment, now is quite a good time for a fundamental root-and-branch review of the social security system? Universal credit sometimes gets a bad rap. The concept in itself is not necessarily bad, but we need to look at how we can reform it to make it work. Churches do the right thing in terms of scripture—they look after our children and feed people—but that is not necessarily the role of churches. We should do a fundamental review of the social security system to ensure that churches can get on with their work rather than having to fill the void that has been created by the state.

Jim Shannon: As always, the hon. Gentleman brings knowledge to these debates, which is helpful. That is a knowledge that he has gained through practical and

physical work on the ground. That can probably be said of everyone present, in fairness, but it is an illustration of that work. What do I think about the universal credit system? It was designed, by its very nature, to help. From what the lady in my office who deals with benefits issues tells me, I often find we have to advise that it might be better for people to stay on what they have at the moment. They should not necessarily transfer to universal credit because that, in theory, could disadvantage them.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there is a need to look at universal credit, and I think that the answer is yes, with respect. It should not be a disadvantage to go on to universal credit. It should not hurt people's benefits. We must remember that the benefits are there for a purpose: they are there to help the person because they have a disablement. They may have care or mobility issues—serious issues. To make the change and lose out financially just does not make sense. I, the hon. Gentleman and probably all Members in the Chamber would be happy to give illustrations of that.

Sometimes our advice has to be that what is available is not necessarily the best thing to go on to. That is the issue, unfortunately. I know that universal credit is there for a purpose, but it may not suit everybody. In addition, it is a widely popular benefit to assist with living costs for those on low incomes. The issue with universal credit is that it is a combination of many benefits and often families will receive less money. That is making it increasingly hard to cope with the rise in the cost of living. The Government, through the autumn statement, indicated that they wish to give people in the benefits system more opportunities to work. I welcome that, but that will not work in every case. It cannot work in every case because people have disability issues that mean they cannot work. In theory, it may help people, as they can gain universal credit and have a job at the same time. There are opportunities, but it does not suit all.

The rise in the cost of living is also having a detrimental impact on people's mental health. Any parent's main priorities for their children are good health, housing and education. There has also been an increase in free school meals and uniform grant applications as parents are struggling to cope with the cost of school payments. This year has been horrendous. I have seen more and more people apply for the grants for free school meals and for uniform. A total of 97,000 children in Northern Ireland are on free school meals. There are consistent delays in processing the claims. The Minister is always keen to assist, so I ask, please, for some urgency when the applications are being processed. Let me give him an example. In September, one of my constituents applied for a school uniform grant. Eight weeks later—about two weeks ago—that money eventually came through. Again, at the time that it was needed, it was not there. It was not that it was not coming; that was not the issue. The issue is the processing of it.

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): I hesitate to interrupt esteemed colleagues in their speeches, because clearly I will try to address as many points as I can in closing. However, as always with any local constituency issue raised by colleagues from any political party, I ask the hon. Gentleman please to write me directly and I will look into it. Although that particular case may have

taken eight weeks and the milk has spilt on that delay, I will look into it to try to see what I can do to ensure that the matters are processed an awful lot more quickly. We all accept that such delays are not acceptable.

Jim Shannon: The Minister has just demonstrated what I said earlier—he is a Minister who wants to help. I appreciate that, and I will take that opportunity. I think we all will. As he said, the milk is spilt and time has moved on, and the lady has got the payment, but she had to cover the full cost of uniform payments and free school meals herself for two months. The point is the pressure that is put on.

I know the Minister is always there, and I thank him for his intervention. He is keen to reach out and always does; he has done so in my constituency. I appreciate that. Could some discussions take place with the Northern Ireland Assembly Minister to get a feel for the situation back home? That could be used to develop a policy that would be helpful for us all.

There must be elements of dignity and fairness in social security support for children. Universal credit will rise by 10.1% in April 2023. I welcome that the Government have shown a willingness to support people. We thank them for the support, not just for children but also for senior citizens. My constituency has an ageing population and we also need to help them.

That help for everyone is welcomed, including those in my constituency of Strangford, but the reality is that people are struggling now. There are ways to tackle that, with more and better jobs and a benefits system that enables people to gain extra work. I think the Government said that in the autumn statement, which the Chancellor delivered last week, but I would like to see how that will work; we need more information, because we advise people.

Whenever we advise someone on benefits, we have to do that in a way that is to their advantage. It cannot be done without knowledge of the subject matter, because that could be detrimental. I am always conscious of that, and we have a very simple policy to always advise the pros and cons. The final decision is up to the applicant, but we have to advise them if there is a negative impact and they have to understand that.

The rise in the cost of living is having an impact on everyone, but some are more vulnerable than others. As the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts said, we are a voice for the voiceless—those vulnerable people, those parents and children in need. We must do better to help them through this time.

10.7 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank you, Sir Christopher, for chairing the debate today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on bringing forward the debate and I thank all hon. Members for taking part.

My hon. Friend made some points about individual organisations in her constituency. I absolutely agree that we should thank those organisations for all the hard work they do, because they are absolutely necessary, but we can do that at the same time as saying they should absolutely not be necessary. It was good to hear about Paul's Parcels and the work that my colleague is doing to support those organisations and the eradication of poverty in her constituency. I hope that all hon.

[Kirsty Blackman]

Members are doing what they can in their constituencies, as well as putting pressure on the UK Government to try and ensure a sufficiency of social security.

Social security is about security; it is about having a secure situation where people can have positive mental health—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about people's mental health—rather than spending every moment worrying about whether they are going to be able to feed their children tomorrow, next week or next month, and whether they will be able to afford food. We need the social security system to work and provide the safety net that it is supposed to. After a decade of Tory Government, it continues to fail and it is not getting better.

I have less optimism now for the futures of my constituents than I have ever had at any point in this job and in my previous job as a city councillor. In about 15 years in an elected role, I have never seen the levels of hardship that I see coming through the door in my constituency office, on the news and in our communities. This has not happened before.

The problem is that there is no light at the end of the tunnel right now, no matter what the Government have announced in terms of inflationary upgrades, for example. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned, that is a temporary measure; it is not permanent and does not provide the level of structural reform people need to afford to live. What could be more important than ensuring that kids are fed and warm? There is nothing more important.

Our Scottish Government are now into their second child poverty action plan. We had “Every child, every chance”, which ran from 2018 to 2022; we now have “Best start, bright futures” from '22 to '26. These plans are about putting tackling child poverty at the heart of the decision-making processes of the Scottish Government. I do not think it is too much to ask that the UK Government replicate that, and say that they care about eradicating child poverty, and therefore will have a strategy to do that and make it a central aim of their plans.

David Linden: More fundamental to that, though, would be if the UK Government could even start measuring child poverty, which is part of the issue. Yes, it would be great if they had a strategy to deal with it—that would be absolutely fantastic—but does my hon. Friend agree that it is alarming that the Government do not even measure child poverty? They do not realise the scale of it, other than by measuring it anecdotally, as I am sure the Minister does in his Hexham constituency when people come through the doors at his surgery on a Friday morning.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree. The fact that the Government are unwilling to even measure child poverty shows the lack of importance they give to this issue. If they cared as much about it as they should, they should be willing to explain, “This is what the current situation is. This is the measurement. This is how bad it is. This is how many people are suffering and how many children are in poverty in the UK in 2022”—in the UK in 2022! How can we be saying this? The UK Government need to stand up, hold up their hands and say, “This is the current situation and this is how we are going to improve it.”

I want to set out a few specific asks, some of which have been made already. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts mentioned, 87% of those affected by the benefit cap are families with children. The benefit cap would need to increase by £942 to reverse the loss since 2013. Despite the fact that the Government are looking to increase it, this is only the fourth time that social security payments have risen with inflation in 10 years. If we in Scotland can find an extra £25 a week in order to provide the Scottish child payment, the UK Government, with their far vaster budget and flexibility in dealing with their fiscal situation, can surely afford to do the same. They can afford it, but they choose not to match the payments we are making in Scotland.

There is the issue of the sufficiency of social security. One in four people on social security skipped meals this summer. That was in the summer—before the additional price cap increase on electricity and gas; before the upcoming winter months when people will need to put their heating on; before people had to buy school uniforms for their children when school started again in August or September. That situation is set only to get worse, and the promise of a temporary increase in universal credit will not fix it. There is currently no way out of this. We have no certainty that there is not going to be a cost of living crisis next year. Certainly none of my constituents has that level of certainty.

Let me turn to the issue of debt repayment deductions that are made from universal credit and other benefits. We have a situation where the UK Government can take 25% off the standard allowance to reclaim debts. Sometimes, those debts are caused by overpayments that are no fault of the person, but entirely the fault of poor decision making in the DWP or job centres. To be fair, that does not happen all the time; I am just saying that sometimes it is an issue.

If the UK Government have done an assessment of social security payments and believe them to be sufficient—that people can afford to live on them—how can they justify putting in place a benefit cap or taking 25% off the standard allowance? They are saying, “This is what we believe is sufficient for people to live on, but we are just going to take a quarter of it away.” It does not make any sense. People already cannot afford to live on the social security payments they are receiving. When the amount people are getting each month is reduced because of those reductions or the benefit cap, it is even less sufficient. Again, the conditionality and sanctions in place reduce that basic minimum level of payment that people should be entitled to.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. There have been occasions where overpayments have been made to my constituents. The money has to be paid back, and they understand that. Reducing payments by 25% is very unfair. In the past, my staff and I have managed to negotiate a reduction of 10%. That option is more manageable and should be given to the person at an early stage. Does the hon. Lady feel that is the right way forward?

Kirsty Blackman: I am glad that the hon. Member has managed that on behalf of his constituents. That is actually not the preferred route that I would take. I would prefer to look at whether people can afford payments rather than coming up with an arbitrary percentage, which is the UK Government's preferred

choice. I would look at affordability. How much are their outgoings and incomings? Can they afford to make the debt repayments? That is what we do, and when organisations like StepChange are managing debt, they look at whether people can afford it.

David Linden: In my time working for Glasgow Credit Union before I was a politician, one of the things we regularly had to do when determining whether someone was eligible to borrow loans was calculate their debt ratio. Although that is required by the Financial Conduct Authority and imposed on things like credit unions, part of the problem is that the DWP does not routinely look at people's income and expenditure. Does the hon. Member agree that the Minister should look at a debt ratio when making these decisions?

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. That is the way this should be taken forward, rather than setting an arbitrary percentage—whether it is 25%, 10% or whatever level. It should be done on the basis of affordability, and a debt ratio would be the preferred method; it would make sense.

One thing that I do not think has been mentioned yet is those people with no recourse to public funds. They are not in receipt of social security payments or the vast majority of payments that are available to others. We are seeing the most drastic and extreme levels of poverty experienced by some of those families, particularly refugee and asylum-seeking families. We are seeing children and families who literally cannot afford any food, and I just cannot believe that the UK Government are unwilling to make any change to the system of no recourse to public funds, because what people are going through is horrendous.

The UK Government stand up and say, “Oh well, it's fine. They can just go home to whatever country they came from.” Generally, people who are here having made an asylum or human rights claim are here because it is worse in the country they came from and because their children are in danger if they go back. In fact, no recourse to public funds sometimes applies to people who are stateless—they have no country to go back to. It is a horrendous situation, and the UK Government need to fix it.

Ms Qaisar: My hon. Friend is making an excellent contribution. On that specific point, I recently visited Manston and saw harrowing scenes of a tent full of families with young children. Those kids should have been playing in nursery; they should have been in a safe area. Instead, they were with dozens of other children in one tent. Does my hon. Friend agree that the wider issue at play is that the UK Government are spending their time othering communities? They are pitting communities against one another—whether they are refugees, working class, gay, lesbian or trans—when in actual fact we should all be uniting and campaigning to get that lot of Conservatives out.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree; I could not have put it better. No matter where they were born, the colour of their skin, their religion, their sexuality or gender identity, those children and families deserve a basic level of human dignity and fairness. That point about dignity, fairness and respect was made earlier. The UK is, in all our names, failing to provide that. It is choosing to make a differentiation between those people

who are in slightly different communities and to treat them differently, and it is therefore trying to make that okay.

In Scotland, we are putting wellbeing at the heart of what we do. We are one of the founding members of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance. We are not choosing to levy austerity on the most vulnerable people in our society; we are choosing to provide respect, dignity and fairness. We are choosing to provide as much as we possibly can within our limited budgets. Our five family payments, including the Scottish child payment, can be worth over £10,000 by the time a first child turns six, and £9,700 for subsequent children. That compares to £1,800 for an eligible family's first child in England and Wales, and under £1,300 for subsequent children. The difference is £8,200, and it highlights the Scottish Government's major support in the early years for low-income families.

This is an incredibly important debate. We need a social security safety net that works. I would rather our social security system accidentally pay the few people who are not eligible—who do not meet the criteria—than miss any one child who should be receiving those security payments and that Government support. The ideological choice that I and the SNP would make is to put dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of the decision-making process. We need to make sure that children are not in poverty, and that our guiding mission and our choices go towards eradicating child poverty.

10.23 am

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond for the Opposition under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on securing this debate. We have heard a small number of contributions, but powerful ones, in which people have reflected not just on the strategic issues of poverty but on the impact of hardship on their constituents. Everybody has said that we are going into a hard winter; for millions, it will be the hardest winter in my 30 years in politics. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for making the point that we are going into the festive season, which many look forward to, but this year people will dread it because of the hardship that they face.

Margaret Ferrier: Even with the energy cap announced by the Government, all families will be spending a significant amount on their energy bills. It will be a cold and grim Christmas for many. Does the shadow Minister agree that support for families—and therefore for children—needs to be reviewed as a whole, not just single benefits?

Ms Buck: I will come to that later, but it is obvious that we need to look at the system as a whole. Indeed, we have to look at the issue of hardship and poverty not just in terms of the social security system, although that is the subject of today's debate and money is crucial, and lies at the heart of tackling poverty; I have never had any doubt about that. We also know that the conditions in which people live and the conditions in which children are brought up reflect poverty in a wider sense.

[*Ms Buck*]

Only this week, we have been discussing in particular the terrible tragedy of Awaab Ishak, who died in a cold and mouldy flat. That coroner's report should be mandatory reading for anybody with an interest in poverty, because the issue of growing up in a damp and cold home is an issue of poverty. If people are not able to heat their homes or access half-decent accommodation in which to live, that is a matter of poverty, as is not being able to secure food and not being able to go to school in a uniform—not being properly clothed, shod and so forth.

I do not think that this is a theme that has particularly emerged in this debate, but all of these issues of poverty cost money—they cost the state billions and billions of pounds. Bad housing alone, which is a condition of poverty, costs the national health service at least £1.4 billion.

The issue of mental health has been referred to. Poverty drives poor mental health; worry and anxiety about money is known to do that. It costs the national health service millions and millions of pounds to respond to it. It also feeds into educational underachievement and impacts on our criminal justice system. We could go right across the issue of state spending, at a local level and a national level, and we would see that money is poured into the costs of poverty. Therefore, when we consider how much we spend on social security, we also need to consider what we will save in the medium and longer term.

The debate is timely, because this time last week we were waiting anxiously to see whether the Government would do the right thing in the middle of a cost of living crisis—something that would, only a few years ago, have gone without saying—which is to uprate social security benefits in line with inflation. As much as we all welcome what happened last week, because we were all very anxious to know what the Government were going to do about uprating, we should not allow the Government to normalise the idea that simply maintaining the real-terms value of social security benefits is an optional extra. If routine uprating of benefits with inflation is evidence of a turn towards compassionate Conservatism, I fear that the bar for compassion has been set very low indeed.

We have been through 12 years in which the Government, as a matter of policy, have repeatedly and permanently reduced the value of social security for working-age adults and children—and, yes, it is a permanent reduction, because the impact of below-inflation uprating in one year does not wash away if benefits are uprated from a reduced baseline the following year. The period of austerity for social security did not end with George Osborne's four-year benefit freeze in 2019 and it did not end last week.

Let us take child benefit alone. It has been uprated this week—again, that is welcome—but it has lost 30% of its real-terms value since 2010. All the Government did last week, welcome though it is, was to decide not to erode the social minimum even further than they already have, and that is before we consider the many ways in which Governments since 2010 have sought to reduce payments even below the social minimum.

The social security infrastructure around children who live in families—whatever shape those families come in—is tough and has been getting tougher. We have heard about debt and deductions for debt repayments being built into the universal credit system through the

five-week wait for the first payment. On top of that, we have benefit caps, the bedroom tax and the two-child limit, and crucially, let us not forget, we have a system of support for housing costs that has been frozen since 2020 and remained frozen in the autumn statement. The failure to uprate the local housing allowance with inflation undoes a great deal of the good that the uprating of social security payments elsewhere achieves, because people live in homes and they have to pay for those homes.

Let me give an indication of how far entitlements can fall below what might be expected to be the social minimum. There are 325,000 households in the private rented sector alone that face a shortfall between their rent and their universal credit housing support and also have a deduction for an advance payment or an overpayment. The median rent shortfall that they have to make up is £100 a month and the median deduction is £65 a month. We congratulate ourselves on the rate of payment of social security, but hundreds of thousands of people are trying to survive on less than even that minimum.

We have a permanently reduced baseline for the social minimum and a policy-driven multiplication of ways in which families can receive even less, and the Government expect to be praised for deciding not to drive down the minimum even further. They like to point to international factors beyond their control as drivers of the cost of living crisis, but they come on top of 12 years in which the social security system for working-age adults and children has been undermined not by the Ukraine war, not by the pandemic, not by international energy prices, but by domestic policy choices.

It suits the Government to pretend that social security policy affects only a minority of families. In fact, the family resources survey shows that, as of 2019-20, nearly 40%—four in 10—of all children in the UK were in families receiving universal credit or one of its legacy equivalents. The great majority—almost three quarters, at 72%—were in working families, and that is just at one point in time. The share of children whose families receive those benefits at some point during their childhood is now higher again.

It is, then, unrealistic to see universal credit and legacy benefits simply as a safety net for the most vulnerable. Of course, that is one of the purposes they serve, and they can serve it considerably less well now than they did before the Government embarked on permanently reducing the value of the safety net. They are also one of the instruments by which our society redistributes resources to families with dependent children, as any modern society needs to do under any economic circumstances.

It is only through social security that we can provide support on a basis that fully takes account of need by basing payment on family size and composition. That basic principle represents yet another way in which Governments since 2010 have broken with the approach of all modern UK Governments since the social security system was established in 1946. As the Child Poverty Action Group points out, the two-child limit already affects 1.3 million children, and cuts income by up to £2,935 a year.

Of course, it is welcome that flat-rate payments are addressing the energy crisis, but by definition they do not take account of family size and circumstances, so

they are not a substitute for an adequate social security system. When YouGov surveyed universal credit claimants for the Trussell Trust this summer, it found that was exactly what was happening. Despite the survey being conducted in mid-August, almost 70% of people surveyed who had received a cost of living payment said that they had already had to spend all the £326 they received from the Government in mid to late July, and 64% had had to use the money to buy food.

We have entered into a cost of living crisis with a weakened social minimum, a system that seems designed to leave hundreds of thousands of families with even less than the minimum, and the principle of matching support to needs in shreds. However welcome the uprating was last year—sighs of relief were heard right across the country—families in their millions are dreading this winter because they will have to choose between feeding their children or heating their homes. It is well past time for the Government to recognise the damage that has been done since 2010 and set it right on a sustainable and permanent basis.

10.33 am

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on her first ever Westminster Hall debate. I confess that it is my first ever Westminster Hall debate in my new role, which I have been doing for just over three weeks. I have not had an opportunity to congratulate her on winning her by-election; it was a worthy win. I send my best wishes to her predecessor, with whom I did huge amounts of work when I was in the pensions brief at the Department for Work and Pensions for five years. I was battle-scarred after five years of working at the DWP. I had a brief sabbatical in the summer when I returned to the Back Benches before the Prime Minister asked me to take on this role. By my count, I have approximately 20 issues to respond to; I will do my best over the next 15 to 20 minutes.

Although the debate was introduced by a Scottish Member of Parliament, it is about social security support throughout the country, and it is timely, given the context of the illegal invasion by Mr Putin of Ukraine, the consequences of the aftershocks of covid, the rise in energy prices, the inflationary impacts that are clearly happening, and last week's autumn statement. Although the autumn statement, which I am sure we will discuss, tried to address many of the issues that have been raised today, it would be naive not to accept and acknowledge that all countries in the western world are attempting to deal with difficulties in respect of the war in Ukraine, the energy price hikes, the fact that we are effectively in an energy war, the consequential impacts on national income, and the impacts of inflation.

The Government are responding to the challenges we face, and in last week's autumn statement we showed a clear commitment to helping families and the most vulnerable. That includes a further £26 billion of cost of living support, on top of the £37 billion set out in spring last year by the then Chancellor. I will try to address the relevant points in a variety of ways. I have been in this role for only approximately three and a half weeks, but I have had the opportunity to go to

jobcentres and meet DWP staff at locations ranging from Canvey Island and Birmingham to Hackney earlier this week.

I have previously visited a variety of jobcentres from Banff to Belfast, from Hastings to Amlwch in north Wales, and from Redcar to Blackpool, and I put on the record my desire to return to some of those locations. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has headed off, but I well remember visiting Shettleston and the Tollcross advice centre in his patch in 2019, and I deeply enjoyed the famous visit to the constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It is not a good thing to advertise the fact that I have been ambushed by a cake, but when I walked into his constituency office his staff literally ambushed me with a lemon drizzle. Obviously, that did not endear me to the previous Prime Minister bar one, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), but I hope to be back in Northern Ireland soon and I take on board the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. I will endeavour to look into the matter when he gets back to me on it.

As the Minister for Employment I cover this brief and others, although not all the matters that have been raised today, and it is certainly my intention to try to visit all parts of the UK shortly. I hope to visit Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland within the next three or four months, depending on parliamentary diaries, negotiations with my good lady wife and various other things, as well as visiting a variety of locations up and down the country, to enable me better to understand the issues that have been raised.

In respect of support for children, the fundamental starting point should surely be the fact that the UK supports children and families throughout the country through child benefit. We need to begin with an assessment of that. It has continued under successive Governments, and as of August 2021 there were 8 million families claiming child benefit and 12 million children in receipt of child benefit. In Scotland alone, 532,000 families and 878,000 children were in receipt of child benefit.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I have a lot to try to address. Let me make a little progress, then I will give way.

Child benefit is available to anyone responsible for bringing up a child aged 16 or under, or 20 if they are in approved education or training. From April 2023, the weekly rate will increase by 10.1%, from £21.80 to £24 for the eldest or only child and from £14.45 to £15.90 for every other child. The UK child benefit bill for 2022-23 is almost £12 billion, and obviously there are other benefits with respect to claiming child benefit, such as national insurance credits, which protect future entitlement to the state pension and can be transferred to grandparents who provide childcare. Claiming also enables children to get their national insurance number automatically at 16.

Margaret Ferrier: The Minister knows that I have a lot of time for him because he sat through proceedings in the Chamber on my private Member's Bill when he was pensions Minister. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, last year a couple working full-time on the minimum wage and a lone parent working full-time on the median wage were able to reach a minimum

[Margaret Ferrier]

standard of living. That is not the case today, although the report was published before the autumn statement. What reassurance can the Minister offer lone parents for whom the cost of raising a child is already higher than it is for couples?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady and I spent nearly six months campaigning to ensure that there was a serious and legitimate change to women's pensions entitlements in certain private sector pensions. I thank her for her work on the private Member's Bill that she brought forward and that is now in law, having been signed by Her Majesty the Queen. I welcome the fact that she worked on a cross-party basis to ensure that happened. I will try to address the child poverty issue that was raised by several colleagues. I want to deal with it in a variety of ways. I will then segue on to the in-work progression point—namely, people who are working but also suffering from poverty.

Let me start with the background. The fundamental point is that the Government are committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackle child poverty in supporting low-income families. We spent £242 billion through the welfare system in the United Kingdom in 2022-23, including £108 billion on people of working age. We have made permanent changes to universal credit worth £1,000 a year on average to 1.7 million claimants, and have given the lowest earners a pay rise by increasing the national living wage by 6.6% to £9.50 from April 2022. From 1 April 2023, the national living wage will increase by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour for workers aged 23 and over. That is the largest ever cash increase to the national living wage. It represents an increase of more than £1,600 to the annual earnings of full-time workers on the national living wage, and is expected to benefit more than 2 million low-paid workers.

I will address the poverty statistics. The latest statistics show that poverty fell for nearly all measures in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20. In 2021 there were 1.2 million fewer people in absolute poverty, before housing costs, than in 2009-10, including 200,000 fewer children. We will come to workless households in a second, but since 2010 there are nearly 1 million fewer workless households in the United Kingdom. The number of children growing up in homes where no one works has fallen by 590,000 since 2010—

Ms Buck *rose*—

Ms Qaisar *rose*—

Guy Opperman: May I just finish? I will also come to the point made by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts. That number has fallen by 590,000 since 2010, and 1.7 million more children are living in a home where at least one person is working. I give way first to the shadow Minister.

Ms Buck: On the issue of absolute poverty, in a previous debate I raised the fact that the absolute poverty figures for larger families—those affected by the two-child limit—have been worsening, rather than improving, as the Minister claims. Will he go away, have a look at that, and inform himself about it when thinking about where to go next on policy?

Guy Opperman: Obviously, being three and a half weeks into the job I am looking forward to learning a great deal. I have merely recited the statistics on people in absolute poverty before housing costs. I will go away and think about the matter. I will give way to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts in a moment; I just want to make a little progress because I have not made much thus far.

I want to address the issue of work and emerging out of poverty. The Government believe, as did previous Governments under the Blair and Brown Administrations, that work is the best and most sustainable way to lift children out of poverty. That is in terms of the parents, I hasten to add. We hope there is then progression in work, which I will come to in detail. Clear evidence exists about the importance of parental employment, particularly when it is full time. The latest data on in-work poverty shows that in 2019-20 children in households where adults were in work were about six times less likely to be in absolute poverty than children in a household where no one was working. I have talked about statistics compared with 2010. Clearly, one job for the Department for Work and Pensions is to address the million-plus vacancies that affect us all in constituencies up and down the country. We certainly want to do that to help to support people to gain the skills that they need to find a job and improve their earnings.

I will try to address in-work progression, which was specifically raised by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts. There is clearly much that jobcentre work coaches are doing up and down the country. Members can go into their local jobcentre and meet and talk with them, and I urge colleagues to do so. I advocate a particular policy, which is called in-work progression. It started in April 2022 and was piloted in South Yorkshire. It was originally a voluntary offer, but it is now being fully rolled out, and approximately 2.1 million low-paid benefit claimants will be eligible for support to progress into higher-paid work. This support for people looking to progress in their current role or move into a new role—which we hope will pay them a greater amount of money, as they progress through the UC thresholds—is provided by work coaches, and focuses on removing barriers to progression and providing advice.

Jobcentres will be supported by a network of 37 progression champions, who will spearhead the scheme. The champions will work with key partners, including local government, employers and skills providers, to identify and develop local progression opportunities. They will also work with partners to address local barriers that limit progression, such as childcare and transport. This is being rolled out in South Yorkshire and Cheshire, and eight further districts will go live next week on 29 November, with champions to be in place beforehand—the recruitment is complete for those districts. Fourteen more districts will go live by 22 February 2023 and the remaining 13 districts will be rolled out by 22 March 2023. Across Scotland—to address the key point raised by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts on in-work progression and support for people who are trying to make more money as they are on UC—that will be rolled out by March 2023, with six district champions.

Ms Qaisar: When I met representatives from Pregnant Then Screwed this week, they told me of their concerns about the plight of women. We have women who want

to work and are more than qualified to work, but the cost of childcare is holding them back. I mentioned this earlier, and I hope the Minister will answer this specific point: will the UK Government follow the suit of the Scottish Government and introduce childcare for children so that women can get back to work?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady has obviously pre-read my speech and the comments that I will make, because my fifth point was going to be about childcare. There are a variety of points, which I will address in their totality; I will then try to deal with the specifics, particularly for those on universal credit.

It is patently obvious that for some parents childcare costs present challenges—at the very least—to entering employment. As the father of a 15-and-a-half-week-old child, I can testify to the bitter experience of that. The Government's 30 hours of free childcare offer entitles all parents of three to four-year-olds in England to 570 hours of free childcare per year, with many children also entitled to the additional 15 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks per year. In addition to helping parents to manage childcare costs and working patterns, free childcare supports children's development.

I will deal in particular with universal credit and childcare, in respect of which there is a massive role for Members of Parliament. Bluntly, those on universal credit are entitled to a massive amount of childcare, but the take-up of that offer is not good.

Kirsty Blackman: They are entitled to 85% of childcare costs—that is absolutely true—but is the Minister aware that the caps set in 2005 have not been updated, despite the fact that childcare costs have since increased dramatically? Will he take a look at those numbers?

Guy Opperman: The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), and I have had a preliminary meeting. The country wants to try to assist parents who want to go back to work. There is a real desire to address childcare on a long-term basis to ensure that parents who wish to can go back to work.

There are many discussions about all aspects of how we reform, improve and expand childcare in this country. The bit that I control is the ability of somebody on universal credit to access and take childcare. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts and I will go and look at that, but the blunt truth is that the take-up is low. That is the first problem. I am genuinely of the view that there is not sufficient knowledge that individuals on universal credit can claim 85% of their registered childcare costs each month, regardless of the number of hours they work. That is a significant increase on the previous 70% of costs that could be claimed back on legacy benefits.

Parents can claim up to a maximum of £646.35 per month for one child and £1,108.04 per month for two or more children. For families with two or more children, that could be worth over £13,000 a year. I take the hon. Lady's point on board and will go away and look at that, but that is still £13,000 of subsidised childcare paid for by the state in circumstances. That support is also available to all lone parents and couples who satisfy both the childcare cost and the work conditions to qualify for help with childcare costs.

I am conscious that there is an issue with prepayment of childcare. Various support funds are used up and down the country. In my three-and-a-half week journey of understanding this issue, there seems to be patchy take-up, but I urge all local areas and individual job centres that are assisting parents in this process to ensure that the various support funds available can be provided. It is not a grant, but it is a provision to pay for the childcare deposit. That is definitely happening up and down the country and we should try to encourage and nurture that on an ongoing basis.

I am conscious of time and the desire to deal with a large number of other matters. The autumn statement saw £26 billion in total, as part of further support in 2023-24, to provide around 8 million households on means-tested benefits such as universal credit with payments of up to £900 to help their income stretch further. That is on top of the £37 billion of cost of living support for households in 2022-23. In addition, there are benefits increases in line with September inflation of 10.1%, worth £11 billion, to working-age households and disabled people. There is also the triple lock and support for pensioners.

We will continue to provide support to all households through the energy price guarantee, which caps the price paid for each unit of energy, saving the average UK household £500 next year. For those who require extra support, we are providing an additional £1 billion to help with the cost of household essentials next year, bringing total funding for this support to £2.5 billion since October 2021. In England, that includes an extension to the household support fund backed by £842 million for the 2023-24 financial year. Devolved Administrations will receive £158 million through the Barnett formula. I could go into detail about support for free school meals across England and about the Healthy Start scheme.

I will briefly touch on the funding and powers in Scotland. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts highlighted the extension to the Scottish child payment. The Scotland Act 2016 devolved significant social security and employment support powers to the Scottish Parliament, worth around £3 billion, as well as providing additional powers to create new benefits in areas of devolved responsibility, top up reserved benefits and provide discretionary payments. The UK Government provided the Scottish Government with a record £41 billion per year Barnett-based settlement at the 2021 spending review. That is the largest settlement since devolution. That record settlement provides the Scottish Government with around 25% more funding per person than equivalent UK Government spending in other parts of the UK.

In respect of various other matters, I will endeavour to write to colleagues. To conclude, I welcome today's debate. I will attempt to work with colleagues on an ongoing basis. It is my job to ensure that there is ongoing support for children through the social security budget that operates throughout the United Kingdom. I commend the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts on her first Westminster Hall debate.

10.54 am

Ms Qaisar: I thank the Minister for his response; he should expect letters from me following up some of the points that I made. As I stated in my opening remarks, I wish to be the voice of the voiceless, which is why I

[Ms Qaisar]

applied for this debate to discuss social security for children. I was pleased to hear Back-Bench contributions from SNP, Democratic Unionist party, Labour and independent MPs, and I thank all Members present for attending. We heard incredibly powerful contributions, although I was saddened that no Back Bencher from the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats attended or contributed.

I did not find the debate adversarial; in fact, there was cross-party support, especially on this side of the Chamber, for collectively joining forces to eradicate child poverty and implement meaningful social security for children. Again, I call on the UK Government to follow the lead of the Scottish Government in increasing childcare hours and offering the baby box and the Scottish child payment. As I have said, the Scottish Government have introduced numerous policies; they hold only limited economic powers, yet they spend their time and money mitigating Tory austerity. Poverty is a political choice, and Scotland wants no part in it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered social security support for children.

Misuse of Nitrous Oxide

[*Relevant document: e-petition 301247, Stop nitrous oxide (N2O/laughing gas) abuse in our communities.*]

10.56 am

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the misuse of nitrous oxide.

As many people will know, nitrous oxide is a substance that has been available for many years. Known more familiarly as laughing gas, it has been used by the medical profession for some time, and in its form of gas and air it is used as a mild anaesthetic by both dentists and doctors—I believe I first came across it during the birth of my eldest son, when it was used to ease the pain of childbirth. It is also used to give a bit of extra whoosh to drag-racing engines: nitrous oxide systems designed to boost power outputs are used for competitive motor events, and of course, it is used in catering for both frothing whipped cream and frothing coffee in home appliances more usually found outside the UK. In that form, it is sold in 8-gram mini-cylinders.

Increasingly, however, nitrous oxide is used for recreational highs. Back in my day, solvent abuse was a problem; today, nitrous oxide—NOS, whippits, hippie crack, balloons; call it what you like—is being used for short-term highs by a new generation. It may be referred to as laughing gas, but in reality, it is no more glamorous than glue sniffing. This is not a new phenomenon. The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 lists specific substances that are illegal; nitrous oxide is not listed, but it is covered by the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. That Act, while not listing specific substances, covers those that fit specific characteristics and definitions. To fall within the remit of the Act, the substance must be capable of having “a psychoactive effect” that affects someone’s “mental functioning or emotional state”

by stimulating or depressing their nervous system. Specifically, this includes effects that we associate with controlled drugs under the 1971 Act such as hallucinations, changes of alertness, changes of perception of time and space, changes of mood and empathy with others, and drowsiness.

The wide definition under the 2016 Act is intended to pre-empt new substances emerging in the drugs market by defining their effects, as opposed to their chemical structure. The Act is good news: it makes it an offence to produce, supply, offer to supply, or possess with intent to supply any psychoactive substance, with a maximum penalty of seven years’ imprisonment. In short, it makes it illegal to sell nitrous oxide for recreational use. The available data tell us that there were 152 convictions in 2017, 107 in 2018 and 52 in 2019 under the Act, but we are trying to find more recent data. Slightly alarmingly, however, West Midlands police got in touch with me only this morning to tell me that since 2015, it has prosecuted only four people under the 2016 Act.

The Act was formally reviewed in 2018, and the review concluded that

“the use of nitrous oxide...does not appear to have been affected by the Act”,

with use by adults increasing to around 2.3% of the adult population, while use by 16 to 24-year-olds stayed steady at just under 9%. Indeed, nitrous oxide is now

the second most commonly used drug in that age group, coming a close second to cannabis, but, as I say, the data are old.

Anecdotal evidence from the medical profession in the west midlands suggests that usage of nitrous oxide has increased markedly since lockdown. The medical profession is picking that up because of the appalling effects that it has on users. Its attractiveness is that it is easy to use. Historically available in small 8-gram cylinders—mini-cylinders—it is inhaled using, commonly, a balloon. Its effects are immediate and include euphoria, giggling, distortion of sound, and hallucinations. Those peak after 20 seconds and resolve after a couple of minutes. It is a quick high and leaves no immediate after-effects. Someone using it once would be able to sit down with, for example, their parents with no evidence that they had been using it in the minutes before. It appears to be harmless, but that is not the case. The reality is that people use it not just once, but for long periods. It used to be available in small 8-gram mini-canisters, similar in size to those of sparklets bulbs—

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate and for making such a significant and poignant speech. I find it very distressing to know that young people are able to access these silver cylinders and that they have such a harmful effect on them. In my constituency, I have seen pockets of those cylinders in various places, and I am pleased that he has brought the matter to the Government's attention. Does he agree with me that we need more work to be done on health and education as well as on enforcement to make sure young people are not able to purchase them?

Mark Garnier: I completely agree. I will be coming on to that, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right. With any legislation, part of it has to be to do with education, and it is important that people recognise that the high is insidious and not without consequences. The fact that it is called laughing gas means that it trivialises what is not a trivial thing.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am really interested in the hon. Member's speech and in the harms from nitrous oxide that he raises. As somebody whose lung was punctured as a result of using nitrous oxide during childbirth, I am keen for what he says about education to be at the heart of the proposals that he is making so that we tell people about the very real dangers they face if they misuse nitrous oxide. The only reason I came through it safely was because I was using it in a medical setting with medical professionals who could look after me.

Mark Garnier: That is an incredibly alarming story, because it was being prescribed presumably by an anaesthetist who knew exactly what they were doing. That was in the form of gas and air, but the people who misuse the drug use it neat, which is much more powerful and dangerous.

What used to require some effort to transfer smallish amounts from a canister to a balloon so that it could be used in a simple way is now something that can be inhaled all evening, sucking in huge quantities of nitrous oxide. Instead of being available in 8-gram canisters, it

is now typically in canisters of up to 600 grams, which allows someone to sit there using it all night. The result is that doctors are now seeing an increase in cases of people being admitted to hospital with serious side effects.

Dr David Nicholl, a campaigner in my region of the west midlands—a local doctor and significant campaigner—tells me that he sees at least one new case every fortnight. Misuse of nitrous oxide creates a vitamin B12 deficiency. That is a vitamin vital for nerve function for both periphery in the hands and feet and in the spinal cord. Practical effects are numbness of the hands and feet and pins and needles, but longer-term use results in people being unable to walk and talk properly, relying on crutches and, in some cases, wheelchairs for, potentially, the rest of their life.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend, who is also a Member of Parliament in Worcestershire. I have canvassed my local police force to understand the impacts on my constituency, as he has done. Is he aware that as well as the health impact that he is discussing, there is also the impact of anaemia in some users? Does he agree that that is a matter of resources for our NHS? We know that in Worcestershire we have problems with our NHS acute trust, so we should educate people not to engage in optional activity that burdens an already overstretched trust.

Mark Garnier: I completely agree. My hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that I spoke to our local police and crime commissioner only this morning about the issue. I have engaged with him over a number of weeks, and he is acutely aware of it, but there are problems.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): On the issue of crime, my constituents in Worcester have been inundated with concerns about Astwood cemetery, where vandalism and theft from graves has been taking place. One of the constituents who came to see me about it, Mrs McAuley, mentioned that the ground around the graves was littered with gas canisters. Is my hon. Friend concerned about the behavioural effect? People have these short-term highs, then carry out foolish and stupid activities, which can be deeply hurtful to people if it is something such as desecrating a grave in a churchyard.

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Desecrating a grave is absolutely appalling. The last time I saw a pile of empty NOS canisters was outside the Royal Society on Carlton House Terrace, which is an unexpected place to see them. I am sure the members were not using it themselves. My hon. Friend is right that it brings about behaviour that, at the time may seem highly amusing to the person affected by it, but has incredibly profound long-term effects to other people around them. I will come to that later. The important point is that something that is used by trained medical professionals for beneficial medical outcomes, although not always without risk, is being misused to the level that it destroys the lives of the users and those around them.

How is nitrous oxide becoming so prevalent? The reality is that there seems to be no one controlling the selling of it. The Act is being ignored at worst, and at best it is very difficult to enforce. Users say that nitrous

[Mark Garnier]

oxide is incredibly easy to get hold of, as it is freely available in corner shops. Moreover, it seems to be getting cheaper while everything else is getting more expensive. The 600 gram canister that I mentioned earlier has dropped from £50 to just £25, bucking the trend of the cost of living crisis. For communities that tend to avoid alcohol, it is an apparently guilt-free alternative.

The availability of nitrous oxide is extraordinary, given that it is being used as a psychoactive drug and is therefore controlled by the 2016 Act. You can google this should you choose to, Sir Christopher. There are websites that sell it nominally as a whipped cream additive, but brazenly give advice on its psychoactive effects and its legality or otherwise as a recreational drug. There is even one website that offers vitamin B12 supplements to counteract its effects. More alarmingly, one website that I looked at offers nitrous oxide not just in quantities for personal use—six 600-gram canisters can be bought for an attractive £130—but by the pallet load. Seventy-two cases of canisters cost an impressive £8,150, which will be delivered to the buyer's door. Remember that the website starts by talking about it as a whipped cream additive but quickly goes on to its misuse. That is either an awful lot of whipped cream, or this is a wholesaler of misery for any number of people.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House. The use of nitrous oxide in the community and the litter that comes from the canisters are constituency issues of great concern to me. I met my police and crime commissioner this morning, and we had a discussion about this. She is concerned about the impact on people driving following the use of these canisters. Would my hon. Friend comment on that?

Mark Garnier: Absolutely. There is definite evidence that people have been killed driving under the effect of nitrous oxide. Although it takes 20 seconds to kick in, and after a couple of minutes it resolves itself, we do not know what the long-term effects are on people's acuity and ability to drive. I suspect that if someone has been taking the stuff all this evening and then gets into their car, even if they have come off the immediate high it surely has some longer term effect on their ability to check traffic lights and all the rest of it.

The website I was referring to looks like a wholesaler of illegal drugs under the 2016 Act. Importantly, the bottles that the nitrous oxide is being offered in suit neither the catering industry nor the medical profession. The medical profession buys it in very large quantities for its important uses. Those bottles can therefore only be being made for misuse.

Back in 2015, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs provided advice on the harms of nitrous oxide and public health and safety. Its conclusion was that, although its harmfulness did not warrant control under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, it was important that it came under the 2016 Act. Back in September 2021, thanks to the British Compressed Gases Association—the trade association that covers the legitimate use of nitrous oxide—the then Home Secretary wrote to the advisory council asking it to review its finding. In her letter, the

Home Secretary cited statistics showing that 550,000 16 to 24-year-olds had used nitrous oxide in the previous 12 months—that is significant use. The advice would inform the Government's decision on whether nitrous oxide should be controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 due to the long-term effects that its misuse can have, which, in theory, was quite a good move forward.

I understand, however, that the Home Office is still waiting for a reply. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm what progress the Home Office has made in chasing up a response to that letter. I have learned from the British Compressed Gases Association that it has raised this again with the current Home Secretary, who has also written seeking guidance from the organisation in question. I gather that the Home Office is on to this, but it seems to be taking some time to get a response.

This issue was brought to my attention by the frankly brilliant campaign being run by BBC Hereford & Worcester—my local radio station—which has been working hard with local campaigner Dr David Nicholl, whom I have already referred to. It is just not David and BBC Hereford & Worcester who are on to this: not only have we had a petition in Parliament that has achieved more than 11,000 signatures, but the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction published a report on Monday that highlights all the points raised here and more. The report, which lists seven case studies from Denmark, Ireland, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK, absolutely reinforces the concerns raised by Dr Nicholl, BBC Hereford & Worcester and my colleagues present.

Mr Walker: Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time when the BBC appears to be considering cutting back on local radio, this is an excellent example of the public service and duty that our local radio provides? The BBC should really reconsider its decision to target local radio for its cuts.

Mark Garnier: I could not agree more. I was going to come to this later, but my hon. Friend has raised it now: he is absolutely right: local radio is fantastic at every level. My hon. Friend and I both know what it is like trying to get around Worcestershire when flooding is coming in; were it not for BBC Hereford & Worcester providing that brilliant support, as other radio stations do, we would not have that help. He raises a brilliant point.

The report moreover reinforces the call by the British Compressed Gases Association for consumer sales to be banned in the UK. This advice has been followed by the Netherlands, which will introduce a ban in January 2023. It seems that anybody who knows anything about this is keen to tackle the problem, but there seems to be a problem with the Government and their agencies.

With all this official information, it is sometimes more meaningful to hear the views of those who have been affected. Earlier this week, I received an email in anticipation of this debate, which, I think, is worth reading out in full:

"Around 5 years ago, I found out that my brother had become addicted to nitrous oxide. He had been introduced to it as a party drug by a friend at university but soon became heavily reliant on it, to the point where he would do it all day, every day. Unfortunately, it turned him from a really kind, intelligent, outgoing and sociable

person to a depressed recluse. He developed Psychosis, suffered from hallucinations and became confused. In one incident, he was convinced that I was impersonating his sister. He subsequently became violent towards my parents and me, and one Christmas tried to kill my father by repeatedly bashing his head with a portable speaker. We were all terrified of him. His nitrous oxide abuse led to him drinking alcohol heavily and gambling, and, two years after we learned of his addiction, he took his own life at the age of 25.

I am so angry that someone who had so much potential—he was an elite athlete, had won a scholarship to a top university in the USA and had just started a great job in finance—had his life destroyed by a drug, which many still consider harmless. We really need greater awareness of the harmfulness of the drug, especially amongst young people. Despite how damaging it can be, you will also know that it is freely available with no checks necessary. Indeed, my brother was able to purchase boxes of it on Amazon with next day Prime delivery and it was being openly sold by a shop around the corner from where he was living.”

We all know that drug use is not free from consequences, which vary from misery for users to misery for all the people, family and loved ones around those who have become addicted. If we agree that nitrous oxide is a drug under the 2016 Act, how on earth is it possible that Amazon can deliver large quantities of it and corner shops can sell it to kids? How is it possible that I can go to a freely accessible website that not only offers it by the pallet load, but provides advice on how to use it as a recreational high? How is it possible that the police are apparently not able to tackle this issue? As I say, my PCC is definitely on to it, but it is a problem.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that awful case, and our hearts go out to the family of those affected. The suggestion from Inspector Rich Field, my local police lead, is that it is very difficult to ban the sale of those sorts of things because, as has been pointed out, they are easily available on Amazon and eBay. The police are suggesting that it be made illegal to have possession of nitrous oxide in a public place for under 16s. What does my hon. Friend think of that idea? I hope the Minister has also noted that and will address it in his final remarks.

Mark Garnier: The answer to my hon. Friend is I think that is exactly the right idea. I have already spoken to the Minister about that, and I know that he is open to ideas—perhaps we will hear his thoughts on that when he makes his response. Importantly, why are we still waiting for an answer to two Home Secretaries’ request for more information from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs? That is where a lot of the answers will come from.

I am grateful to the Minister for his time, and I look forward to hearing what plans he has to deal with this 21st century version of glue sniffing. We have already heard of the tragic consequences for somebody who became addicted. The Minister potentially has in his hands the ability to prevent further unnecessary misery. Finally, I congratulate David Nicholl and BBC Hereford & Worcester on their work. As we have heard, the BBC are introducing changes to local broadcasting that fly in the face of all logic. I will end on a point that is slightly unrelated to the main debate, but the work done by local radio is so important, and BBC Hereford & Worcester is such a good example of that.

11.16 am

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for securing this important debate. I put on record my thanks to his local radio station, BBC Hereford & Worcester, for its tireless and energetic campaigning and investigative journalism in this area. As my hon. Friend said, work by local radio stations, such as BBC Hereford & Worcester, is extremely important in raising those issues and drawing them to the attention of local Members of Parliament, and, through them, the Government.

The Government share the concerns that hon. Members have raised about the use of nitrous oxide. We are very conscious about its growing levels of use recreationally, particularly by younger people aged between 16 and 24. We are concerned about the effect it has on people’s physical and mental wellbeing. Often, drug consumption can have effects that take quite a long time to manifest. For example, we know long-term cannabis consumption can lead to psychosis and psychotic episodes, but it takes quite a long time for that to manifest. With any sort of psychoactive substance there can be effects that are not immediately obvious, and only after the passage of time do they become clear.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): This is a slight change of topic, but in Coventry we have had young people paralysed due to the neurological effects of this particular drug. Would the Minister speak to his counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care about running a public health campaign to raise awareness about the effects of this drug?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right to point to the need to elevate public awareness. All too often we find that people make an assumption about something that, on the face of it, appears relatively innocuous but can in fact have serious effects, either over time, as in the case of cannabis and psychosis, or if consumed in excessive quantities. The point my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest made about very large cannisters is concerning. The point she makes about people ending up paralysed by consuming huge amounts of this stuff is deeply concerning. I will write to my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care conveying exactly that suggestion. I think it is a good idea. It may be worth her raising it directly with Health Ministers, but I will certainly write on that point.

Janet Daby: That is absolutely the right suggestion. With the public health campaign, could the Minister also speak to his counterparts in the Department for Education to make sure there is that connection between health and education, so that young people are receiving that information early?

Chris Philp: I can see my job list growing with every passing minute of this debate. I am happy to raise that with Department for Education colleagues. Education is important so that young people understand the risks they are running when they take nitrous oxide. We support an organisation called Every Mind Matters, which is an online resilience-building resource aimed particularly at 11 to 16-year-olds and provides them

[Chris Philp]

with information to make informed choices. Raising concerns about these drugs is important. Children obviously get taught about it in schools through relationships, sex and health education. That teaching became compulsory in schools from September 2020, so part of the curriculum is set aside for messaging of the kind that the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) pointed to.

Let me turn to some of the questions raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest, for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Worcester (Mr Walker) about the legal framework and where we are with that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest said, nitrous oxide is currently controlled under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 rather than the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, and there are provisions in the 2016 Act that control the supply of it but do not criminalise possession. It is an offence to supply nitrous oxide if the person supplying it knows or is reckless as to whether it will be used for its psychoactive effect. There is a legal duty on the supplier not to act recklessly in supplying it.

I was very interested by the example my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest gave about an online company who were in his words acting as a “wholesaler” of this drug. He thinks it is not for legitimate purposes to do with whipped cream or other related commercial applications, but for use in a psychoactive context. He says the website sells it in forms of packaging that would appear to suggest it would be used for psychoactive effect, and there is content on the website pointing in the same direction, including suggesting people can take vitamin B12 supplements to counter the effect the nitrous oxide has. That all points to the fact that they may be supplying it for psychoactive purposes, not legitimate commercial purposes.

I have not seen the website, but were that the case, it would strike me that it probably would be reckless. The company acting in the way he describes would be acting recklessly as to whether or not it is being used to psychoactive effect. In fact, in some ways, the company might be implicitly encouraging it, considering the content he describes. I think my hon. Friend would have a case to refer that website to the police, drawing their attention to the provisions I pointed to. There might be grounds for investigation and prosecution under the law as it stands today for the reasons I just set out.

Mr Walker: I am very grateful to the Minister for making that clear. He is right. Where there is concern about these things, the website should be referred. I have come across similar cases in relation to even more dangerous substances. He will know about some of the debates we have had previously about DNP—or 2,4-Dinitrophenol—which is a highly toxic and deadly substance, sometimes mis-sold as a slimming aid or exercise supplement. Does the Minister agree that we need stronger powers to ensure we can take action against websites that sell these substances, because I am concerned.

I have seen cases and cases have been raised by my constituents where drugs that can literally kill people, simply through being ingested, are being mis-marketed, or marketed in a way my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) described—where it explicitly says, “This is not the use for it,” but then goes on to

imply that someone can buy it and use it for all those things. That is very, very dangerous, particularly for young people to whom these things are targeted. Can I urge him to take more action?

Chris Philp: Yes, I think that is a very important point. Where the substance concerned has a psychoactive effect, it will fall under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and where people are supplying it recklessly in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester just described, there is basis for action. If there is no psychoactive effect but the substance has some other adverse medical effect, that would obviously not fall within the purview of that Act, but such substances are regulated separately through the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and other regulators, who can make regulations to restrict supply. If there is evidence that there is misuse of substances that are legal, either tightening that regulation or having them reviewed by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is the right way to go. If my hon. Friend has particular examples, he should write to me and I would be happy to take them up.

I am conscious that time is pressing upon us.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): It is always pressing.

Chris Philp: Yes, time does always press.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): This debate can go on until half-past eleven, but not beyond, if that is the question the Minister is asking.

Chris Philp: Thank you. That is very helpful, Sir Christopher; that was the clarification I was seeking, alongside your more metaphysical point about the pressing nature of time in general.

I return to the questions on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest eloquently and accurately put it, this matter was referred to the ACMD by the Home Secretary in September of last year, 12 or 13 months ago. We have not yet received its report. The Home Office has raised the matter. The ACMD is independent of Government so cannot be compelled, but it would be proper to draw its attention to this debate and the concerns that have been expressed from both sides on the issue, to make sure that it is aware of the strong parliamentary interest in this matter. That would be a proper and reasonable thing to do without trespassing on its independence. I agree with my hon. Friend that the issue needs to be looked at urgently.

Generally, the Government follow the advice of the ACMD because it has the medical expertise, although we are not obliged to do so. It is within that organisation's power to make a recommendation on how the drug should be classified. If it were to give advice that it thought the drug sufficiently damaging, it would be open to the Government to reclassify and bring it within the remit not of the 2016 Act but of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, at which point it would become a prohibited drug and would fall into class A, B or C. The Government take the ACMD's recommendations very seriously because it is the expert in this area.

Rachel Maclean: Will the Minister enlighten us, for the benefit of those of us not quite familiar with the role of this body? Does its recommendations include providing changes to the law and legal frameworks such as making it illegal to possess those substances in a public place, as I referred to earlier? How would that be enforced, based on those recommendations?

Chris Philp: The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs principally makes recommendations about how harmful a particular drug is and therefore how it should be classified under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. That is the advice we have sought in this case. The consequences that then flow from classification are matters for Parliament to legislate; they are set out in law. There are obviously different criminal penalties depending on whether a drug is in class A, B or C, and there are different penalties for possession versus supply. The advice we are seeking is essentially medical advice on just how damaging the drugs are and therefore which regime they should fall within. I will convey to the ACMD how pressing Members of Parliament feel the issue is, quite rightly. The points raised have been very powerful and well articulated. I will undertake a third action to go and do that. This is an important issue, about which we are concerned.

I add a point before closing about the powers that local authorities have. One or two Members mentioned the associated antisocial behaviour and littering. There are powers available under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 and other legislation to make various forms of order in this area, including orders on antisocial behaviour and dispersal. We also have public space protection orders, which are available to local councils to stop individuals or groups committing antisocial behaviour in a public space; such behaviour would clearly fall into that remit. Following consultation by councils with the police or the local PCC, councils can issue a PSPO, which would effectively prevent the activities taking place in a particular area. If there are Members who feel there is a problem in a particular location, I would suggest they get their local council to use PSPOs as an immediate measure and way of taking action. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the misuse of nitrous oxide.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Support for British Farming

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Welcome to this important debate about British farming. It is a delight to call Simon Jupp to move the motion.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for British farming.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I am delighted to have secured this timely debate, which is an opportunity for colleagues from across the House to voice their support for British farming. We have a lot to celebrate, alongside some concerns.

As the Member of Parliament for East Devon, I am proud to represent a corner of the UK with an extremely rich farming heritage. Devon's farmers play a key role in the life of our county. Around 100,000 people get a snippet of that every year at the Devon County Show at Westpoint arena, which is held almost every July.

We know that the freshest, most sustainable and best produce is both local and seasonal. Local produce from across the south-west is found on shelves across the UK and around the globe. With that in mind, trade deals are of benefit to our region. We must take advantage of our Brexit freedoms, but we must also work harder to take the farming community with us. Leaving the EU allows the UK to leave behind a bureaucratic and inefficient farming policy. The Government rightly want to use our new-found powers to reward farmers for doing more to help improve the environment while also producing high-quality food.

However, the farming industry needs more certainty to both survive and thrive. I regularly hold roundtable events with the farming community in East Devon, and I hear that message about clarity loud and clear. Last month, I invited local farmers to a roundtable event with senior officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Rural Payments Agency. Farmers, agents and others are eager to see how various elements of the new farming funding system will underpin their sustainable and resilient businesses. Support schemes will need to be accessible and simple, and they will also need to reward farmers fairly for taking part in them.

So my first plea in this debate is that DEFRA looks to accelerate the development and roll-out of the sustainable farming incentive. Incentivising farmers to take part in rewilding schemes or to plant trees on prime agricultural land may seem a worthy policy in Whitehall, but it will not put food on the table in the west country. Farmers have said to me, "You cannot eat trees." Needless to say, a balance is required. Food production and environmental sustainability are not necessarily in competition, and nor are they mutually exclusive, but support schemes should always encourage farmers to produce food. That is the only way to deliver on the ambition of the UK food strategy to maintain or increase our food self-sufficiency, which is all the more important given the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the challenges resulting from the war in Ukraine has been the increasing cost of energy and that one challenge for farmers is the cost of energy?

[Anne Marie Morris]

In his autumn statement, the Chancellor said that he would provide additional targeted relief for businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that those businesses must include farmers?

Simon Jupp: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is incredibly important that the agricultural industry is recognised, because energy bills have shot up. Also, quite a few of our agricultural businesses in Devon and beyond rely on heating oil. We know that additional support is on the way, but we will have to wait and see whether that is enough for people to weather the storm. However, I and other MPs in the south-west of all party political colours will be listening to our farmers and representing their views back to Government.

Putting domestic food production first should also apply to trade negotiations. Britain is now free independently to strike new trade deals across the world, and colleagues should have enough time and opportunity to scrutinise such arrangements in the House. Giving Parliament more say in the process, in terms of both the negotiating mandate and the scrutiny of these trade deals, will strengthen the consent for them from the farming industry and the public. That is very clear.

I sympathise with the comments made by my right hon. Friend Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who recently criticised the path undertaken by the Government in signing the trade deal with Australia. The deal undoubtedly brings benefits, but as a Government we can and must do better in the future. In the summer of 2020, I supported an amendment on food standards tabled by the former Member for Tiverton and Honiton to the Agriculture Bill. The Government listened and acted, setting out that our high standards for domestic and imported products will remain.

I particularly welcomed the setting up of the independent Trade and Agriculture Commission, which must ensure that the voices of everyone involved in food production are properly heard. I would really like to see more engagement between commission officials and MPs, with the commission bringing back some of the regional evidence sessions that it held back in 2020. Those were invaluable in feeding back concerns from farming communities in Devon, the wider south-west and across the country.

There are many other topical issues I would like to touch on before I conclude my remarks, and which I am sure are high in the new Minister's in-tray—not least rising input costs for things such as fertiliser, slurry rules and avian influenza. Those issues are playing on the minds of local farmers, alongside significant concerns about abattoir capacity in the south-west and across the country.

I will finish my remarks by talking about workforce shortages. Those are an acute issue across the agricultural industry, especially in the south-west, and DEFRA must keep working closely with the Home Office on a long-term strategy for the food and farming workforce. Farming is a skilled career, and it is a labour of love for many. Excellent colleges, such as Bicton in my constituency, keep the flame alive in the younger generation, but is it enough and are we doing enough to encourage young people into these careers? There are ample career opportunities for UK workers in the food and farming sectors, but are

we selling that dream to people who are thinking of joining the industry or who have an interest in working on our land?

The farming industry needs sufficient access to labour in the meantime, with the industry calling for the seasonal worker scheme to be increased to a minimum five-year rolling programme to help give farms certainty to invest. The Prime Minister committed to look at expanding seasonal worker schemes in his leadership campaign during the summer, and he was absolutely right to do so. I hope that that is something that DEFRA Ministers and the Home Office can take forward, particularly for the poultry and pig industries, which have faced real problems in the last 12 to 18 months.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a proud defence of British farming. One of the challenges is around the seasonal agricultural workers scheme—that is certainly true in my constituency, where we will end up with food rotting in the fields, because there are not sufficient people to harvest it. The hon. Gentleman talked about training people from the UK and bringing them into the industry, but does he acknowledge that the changes to the scheme mean that those people from overseas who worked in the sector for a long time are now prevented from coming here and cannot pass on their skills to the next generation?

Simon Jupp: That is an interesting point and it needs exploring, which is why I am asking for more flexibility in the schemes the Government provide. We know that this is an acute issue in the area that my hon. Friend represents, but also in the area that I represent. The industry is very clear on this issue, which is why I am mentioning its views today.

Unprecedented events are placing a lot of pressure on our farmers, so today's debate is a timely opportunity for the House to demonstrate its support for the industry, and I am glad to see so many people here who want to do so. Farmers are the custodians of our countryside. They create new habitats, protect wildlife, produce the raw ingredients that feed our nation, and export food around the globe. It is a seven-day-a-week profession and a labour of love across many generations. I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions and to hearing from the Minister, who is experienced and knowledgeable, about his support for British farming.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues can see that the debate is well attended. There are nine colleagues wishing to catch my eye, and they will have about five and a half minutes each until the winding-up speeches begin.

2.39 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Gary, and to follow the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp); he made an excellent speech, and I warmly congratulate him on securing this important debate.

I should say at the outset that I have a long-standing love of the countryside and have spent a lot of my life on farms over the years. For the purposes of transparency,

I want to declare that my son is at agricultural college in Yorkshire, my parents-in-law are farmers, and I am the grandson of a farm worker. I should also say that a sizeable portion of the borough of Barnsley is in a national park, and I am proud that there are a number of farms in my constituency.

Let me say something about the challenges farmers face and what I think we should be doing to support them. The UK benefits from better food security if British farmers produce more food. The war in Ukraine has brought that into sharp focus, as it has caused an abrupt decline in global food production, but the UK has experienced a longer decline. According to the National Farmers Union, we now produce 60% of our domestic food consumption, down from 80% in the 1980s. The Government have an important role to play in reversing that trend, but we can all play our part by buying local produce.

A recent report by the CPRE showed that, pound for pound, spending in smaller, independent, local food outlets supports three times as many jobs as spending at supermarkets, and buying direct can be even better for some farmers. In my area, the Hill family, who run a local dairy farm, have shown entrepreneurial spirit by setting up a very sophisticated vending machine so that people can buy their dairy products directly. They call it “Milk From The Hills”—local milk from local cows helping local farmers.

Members who speak to their local farmers know that farming has rarely, if ever, been easy. So we must support farmers during difficult times, and the latest outbreak of avian influenza is a timely reminder of that. I acknowledge the need for the Government’s national housing order for poultry, along with steps to improve the compensation scheme, although there is some way to go to get that right. Ultimately, strong biosecurity will help prevent and mitigate many threats, but the Public Accounts Committee reported last week that the Government are not prioritising the significant threat to UK health, trade, farming and rural communities posed by animal diseases. That has led to the Animal and Plant Health Agency site in Weybridge having more than 1,000 single points of failure. The completion of the redevelopment programme, due in 2036, will be cold comfort to farmers, especially given that avian influenza is not the only threat.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is right about the contribution of biosecurity to tackling avian influenza, but does he agree that, because of the interaction between the wild bird population and domestic birds, biosecurity will never be the whole answer to the problem? To be honest, I do not know what the answer is, but to put all our metaphorical and political eggs in the biosecurity basket risks leaving us with no solution in the long term.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. I understand that there will be a debate on that subject in the House next Wednesday. That is a really important opportunity for Members to put points to the Minister, who takes these things very seriously. I hope that that debate will be well supported. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

On biosecurity, African swine fever is a real danger, but the Government have not yet shown that they appreciate the need for strong border checks. I would be

grateful if the Minister could say something about the need to keep it out of this country. It is in Germany, and many hon. Members are concerned about the potential for it to come here.

Farmers do diligent work to keep their livestock healthy, and we all respect the fact that farming can be physically demanding. Despite recent advances in technology, it can, as we heard from the hon. Member for East Devon, still require a significant workforce, crucially at harvest time. The seasonal workers scheme must secure the labour needed to ensure that we can produce the food we need.

In response to a written question that I put to the Minister back in October, he said:

“40,000 seasonal worker visas were available in 2022”.

However, the NFU says that farmers need between 60,000 and 70,000 seasonal workers. It is important to note that those workers are not the same as other economic migrants: they return home after performing critical work and filling labour shortages. I would be grateful if the Minister could say something about what his Department is doing to ensure that supply meets demand.

Despite the large workforces sometimes required, we appreciate that farming can be a solitary experience, so we need to ensure that our young people see farming as an attractive option for their future. The Farm Safety Foundation reported in February that 92% of farmers under 40 rank poor mental health as the biggest hidden problem facing farmers. That is a concerning figure. I know that the Minister will understand this issue and take it seriously, so will he say something about the Government’s plans to target outreach to young farmers to make sure they get the support they need?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Dan—10 seconds.

Dan Jarvis: To conclude, it is very important that we nurture those who feed us and that we support the stewards of our countryside so that they can fill our national larder and protect our green and pleasant land.

2.45 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for luring me back into Westminster Hall for such an important debate. He spoke eloquently about the importance of rural communities, which we all fundamentally believe in. I represent a part of Essex that is known for its rurality and for its coastal constituency values as well. Farming needs to be recognised as a strong, dynamic and entrepreneurial part of our economy, as well as for the agricultural quality that it brings. My hon. Friend also spoke about the fact many of our rural communities maintain our beautiful countryside and about some of the challenges that come with that.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) spoke about buying local produce, so I will advertise local produce from the Witham constituency, which can be purchased here in Westminster as well. There are the famous jams from Tiptree’s Wilkin & Sons, which holds a royal warrant. With Christmas fast approaching, I urge everyone to make sure they stock up on Christmas puddings from Tiptree.

[Priti Patel]

Importantly, there are many other farms that supply produce, and my hon. Friend touched on the issue of trade—our ability to export around the world. Importantly, we also have the ability to feed our domestic population. In Essex, we have the fantastic Wicks Manor farm, which produces amazing pork products—sausages and bacon—much of which goes across the world. It is also the birthplace of the famous milkshake known as Shaken Udder. We also have Humphreys at Blixes farm; Daymens Hill farm, which has an amazing orchard with nearly 4,000 varieties of apples and pears; and Blackwells farm shop. In addition, this House has the privilege of selling Linden Lady chocolates, which are very famous, in its gift shop—I recommend them.

That is just a small taster of what my constituency's farmers and producers have to offer. They want more trade and fewer barriers to trade. They want to ensure that they can grow their businesses and see much more progress. Of course, two years of covid have left many challenges. There is the pain of inflation and what that means not only for wages but rising global food prices. Higher petrol and diesel costs also have an impact on farmers' ability to operate.

Farmers are also being squeezed by the supermarkets. Everyone will be aware of the margins that supermarkets chase. The Government must hold the supermarkets to account.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Groceries Code Adjudicator—the regulator for supermarkets, farmers and price controls—needs to be given more teeth and to have greater control so that our farmers are not suppressed?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know the Minister has heard those comments, and he is familiar with the issue too.

Avian flu has been mentioned. I appreciate that the Minister has been involved in many debates, and there have been many meetings across the House as well, and I want to express my thanks for that support. But farmers face numerous pressures in terms of the regulations and some of the enforcement. I would welcome further details from the Minister on the measures that are being looked at to support farms.

In Essex and across the country, avian flu is very severe. One farm in my constituency has been left devastated by an outbreak. Despite the farm taking all the measures around biosecurity—I am pleased to hear that there will be a debate on that next week—the strain was still detected. As we know, it is causing disruption to the poultry supply chain, which will impact on the costs of poultry. I hope that we can continue to have constructive discussions and support our farmers around the implications of avian flu.

I would like to touch on investment in farming. I have picked up already the comments that have been made about the labour market, labour market reform, and the infamous seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which has more than 40,000 available places. We should not always depend on overseas labour, not just in farming, but for our country and wider economy. There are active discussions, which I hope the House will welcome, around the development of the labour market strategy.

That is something that I, with the former Chancellor—now the Prime Minister—had been pursuing in Government, and I know that the current Chancellor is also looking at that.

It is important that we support our entrepreneurs—our farmers are entrepreneurs; we have heard about the hard work and the graft that goes into farming—but we must be able to give farmers long-term security around investment in technology. When it comes to picking fruit or produce, capital allowances can help enormously, alongside a solid labour market strategy that attracts and develops the workforce.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today. Farming and agriculture are the backbone of our country; they need to be nurtured and invested in. I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks.

2.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and to be able to say—unlike, perhaps, on some occasions when she was in the Home Office and I shadowed her—that there was a great deal in her speech with which I agree. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on getting this debate, and I am pleased at the measure of consensus, because consensus is very important for agricultural policy. In politics, we tend to work on a four or maybe five-year cycle. In agriculture and farming, that is but the blinking of an eye. I should, parenthetically, remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am a farmer's son and now a landowner myself.

The real support for agriculture that we need from Government is more certainty. That, of course, will come from the future of farm payments; they have hit difficulties south of the border. North of the border, we must still wait and see. We welcome the consultation that is outstanding. I share some of the frustrations of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, which came forward with proposals four years ago that would have put active agriculture at the heart of environmental policy; it feels there has been a missed opportunity. However, if we get what we need from that consultation, it would behove us all to welcome it.

In particular, in my community, I am keen to see a flexibility that shows an understanding of the local social and economic benefits from agriculture. We have two dairy farms left in Shetland; they have been whittled down—salami-sliced away—over the years. Last week, we had four days without ferries, so our supermarkets, Tesco and the Co-op, which would normally import much of the milk, were not able to do so. For those four days, we were reliant on those two dairy farms for milk for our communities. If there is not an opportunity there for public money for a public good, then I do not know where there is one.

Chris Loder: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the supermarkets' dominance of our national food supply chains is now just too much? It is defeating the objective that he mentions, which I have long advocated for: local food, getting through local supply chains to local people, is the way forward.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman risks triggering me—if my children were here, I think that is what they would say—because that is a theme on which I have spoken many times. He is absolutely right. I was part of the Government who introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator. I am disappointed that it has not worked; it needs to be revisited.

There are other powers in the Agriculture Act 2020, and with the Competition and Markets Authority, that could be brought into force, and I think that the consensus in rural and agricultural communities across the country is that that should be done. There is an imbalance between the purchasing power of the supermarkets—which are maybe 10 behemoth commercial organisations, at most—and that of the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of farmers across the country. The supermarkets have been allowed to take advantage of their market dominance for too long, and that absolutely must end.

There are a couple of other areas where the lack of certainty is becoming difficult for the agricultural sector. The progress of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is one. I know the Minister understands that, because I was with him when he heard from the National Farmers Union of Scotland about its concerns. There is a real concern that, because of the way the Bill is framed, we risk losing some of the most important legislation, almost by omission. There must be a more pragmatic and practical way to deal with the concerns that that Bill seeks to address that does not risk unintended consequences.

There are other areas in which agriculture, certainly in my community, could benefit from support, but that requires Governments in Edinburgh and Westminster to be prepared to listen. I see some of the debate about the transportation of live animals by sea and it scares me. The people who talk about that issue seem to have no interest in the fact that those of us in the Northern Isles, having years ago designed the state-of-the-art, blue-chip system for transporting animals by sea, risk being caught in legislation that frankly does not take account of our needs and circumstances.

I know the Minister is good at this, and he has a background that will allow him to do it: he must take his heft into Government and deliver. He must be prepared to listen to the people who know most about agriculture: the farmers. If he does that, the benefit is not just to farmers and farm workers, but to the rural communities across the countryside. Good agricultural policy makes for sustainable rural communities; it is as simple as that.

2.57 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and all hon. Members, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), whom I thank for securing the debate. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. I have been promoting him since I got here in 2010; I have been asking, “Why don’t the Government put him in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs?” He, a farmer, is now here; I cannot believe it. Someone who understands what we are talking about, and what we want, is a Minister with the power to help us. I refer to my entry in

the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a landowner and farmer, so I speak with a lot of passion and experience in this field.

When I was selected as a candidate in 2006, one of my first tasks was to set up a farming group. It meets every quarter. That group started with two members, and now at least 50 or 60 appear. The Minister has often come along to it, either virtually or in real life. We hope this Minister will come long in real life soon, so that our farmers can talk to him and put across their concerns.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is highlighting the same point as many colleagues: the importance of listening to local farmers on local issues. Farmers in my constituency have asked the Government to extend the policy of culling on a discreet basis for a further three years, when it ends at the end of this year, as part of the co-ordinated approach in Cheshire to tackling bovine TB. Does he agree that it is vital that we consider farmer-led approaches to such challenges?

Richard Drax: My hon. Friend has taken the words out of my mouth. In the dying moments of my speech, I will talk briefly about badgers and beavers, since I am slightly concerned about their presence in small Dorset rivers.

What we all want, and the public demand, is cheap food. If we as farmers are to produce cheap food, we need help—not to grow trees and all the other green things, although I totally accept that there is a place for that, but to grow food. We frequently hear Ministers refer to the public good; production of food should be at the top of the list of public goods.

As hon. Members have said, we have had a war, a pandemic, world food shortages and climate change, and there are terrifying predictions of food shortages around the world. We will have to become more and more self-sufficient, and farmers will have to farm more efficiently. Farming is an expensive game. Buying or leasing agricultural equipment—combine harvesters, tractors and all the rest of it—costs hundreds of thousands of pounds. Many farmers simply cannot afford it, not least tenant farmers. We would all like to see some form of grant, through which farmers could apply for money for those sorts of things.

As I said, the public need—and want—cheap food. We have left the EU. I was a Brexiteer; I was one of those crying to leave, and I am delighted that we have left. However, we face a danger if we do not help our farmers. Certainty is desperately needed, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, because as the basic payment scheme slides away and alternatives come in, there is a big hole there; and as a result, many farmers, not least those in remoter parts of our country, will struggle. That hole needs to be filled. We need certainty, and they need reassurance. The alternative, which none of us wants, is cheap imports. That is not the way forward. That will not increase self-reliability, or counter all the threats that this country and the rest of the world face.

I will touch briefly on the badger cull. I understand that this is a contentious issue; the badger is a protected animal. I do not agree with that personally. I like to see badgers. We love to see deer, foxes, and every other wild animal, but these animals no longer have predators. If we do not maintain them, look after them and ensure

[Richard Drax]

that they are healthy by securing the right numbers, then—as we know—the badger population grows exponentially and disease spreads.

The culling practices have worked. The statistics are pretty impressive; we cannot refute them. They show that culling badgers reduces the impact of bovine tuberculosis, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, has devastated the beef and dairy industries. I urge the Minister to go back to this issue. I believe that badger culling will end, but I urge him to stop saying that we will end it. We must continue the cull, just as we cull deer and foxes, but in a balanced way, so that we have the right balance of wildlife in our countryside.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon mentioned that rewilding must not come at the expense of growing food. There is a place for green trees and rewilding. However, Scotland experimented with it, and once beavers had bred, they did not keep to the allocated space. They went all over the place. They are not appropriate for small rivers in Dorset.

3.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for setting the scene so well. Farming and agriculture are at the heart of both our areas. I declare an interest as a farmer. I am also a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, and have been for many years; we are in regular contact. My main reason for joining, if I am quite truthful, is that the insurance premiums were excellent. I have been a customer for over 30 years as a result.

I am in full support of the farming industry; it is crucial for the UK and an integral part of our economy. It is great to be here to exchange ideas, and also to hear the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) speaking. I happen to disagree with him on one point: I think that all foxes—every one of them—should be controlled, but that is just my opinion. I will put that on the record. All foxes should be controlled. There should not be any foxes, but that is by the by. It is great to listen to other Members, and to see the Minister in his place; he has landed in the right job, and we are all very pleased to him there.

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in Northern Ireland; it brings an estimated income of £501 million as of 2021—an increase of some 8.3% from 2020. Agriculture thrives in my constituency of Strangford; we have numerous companies that are bywords in the constituency. Willowbrook Foods, Lakeland Dairies, Mash Direct and Rich Sauces have a combined workforce of probably just over 3,000. I have mentioned before that Lakeland Dairies has four factories in Northern Ireland and five in the Republic; that highlights the importance of smooth and frictionless trade. There are countless dairy farmers across Northern Ireland who deal with Lakeland Dairies, and that has proven to be an incredible success in the dairy farming trade.

Employment is a major factor in the agrifood sector, hence the importance of securing funding and support from elected representatives. It does not matter if someone does not come from a constituency that is rich in farming; the supplies from farmers to other local businesses are equally important.

Furthermore, the sector employs some 70,000 people in Northern Ireland, so we cannot take away from the importance of those jobs for us in Northern Ireland. We export some 80% of our goods, so we depend on exports to survive. The Department for the Economy has concluded through economic modelling that there could be up to 10,000 fewer jobs, depending on the nature of the relationships established with the EU. I have to put this on the record, and the Minister knows it is coming: the Northern Ireland protocol disadvantages us in Northern Ireland. I know the Minister accepts that issue, but it is important for us that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill be agreed to. When it left the House of Commons for the House of Lords, it was where we wanted it. We hope it will return in a similar fashion.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point on the protocol. We have heard today of the challenges facing farmers. Would he agree that in Northern Ireland there are additional challenges because of the protocol? Look at the seed potato issue. We cannot get seed potato from Scotland to Northern Ireland. Some 50% of veterinary medicines will not be available to Northern Ireland in January after the grace period. Does he agree that the protocol needs to go? Great Britain's farmers would not accept it, so Northern Ireland farmers should not have to, either.

Jim Shannon: I totally agree. My hon. Friend is our party's agriculture spokesperson, so I am pleased to have that contribution made. Land use in Northern Ireland is now dominated by improved grassland management for dairy, beef and sheep production; there are also small pockets of cereals, mostly in County Down. I am privileged to have a farm that is agriculturally sound, and the land is very productive, as it is for many farmers across Mid Down and Northern Ireland. I have highlighted the importance of community farming numerous times, and nominated a constituent of mine, Emily McGowan, for the National Farmers Union community hero award. She is a young girl with a deep interest in farming, and I hope she does well.

Community and local farming are the backbone of business in Northern Ireland and the UK. Mash Direct supplies good, healthy, hearty food to numerous large retailers across the United Kingdom at an affordable price. ASDA and local Spars in Northern Ireland are some of their major retailers. That business started out of a kitchen 15 or 20 years ago. Mash Direct has been looking at becoming more sustainable and protecting the environment by installing solar panels at its family farm. It looks forward and has a vision for the future. This is another milestone in how farming can become carbon neutral. The farming industry is crucial to the UK economy, and we must support it. As stated, farming plays a major role in our achieving our environmental targets. It provides tens of thousands of jobs across the United Kingdom, and supports businesses with fresh and decent food for our constituents.

Finally, farmers face increasing stock prices on items such as fertiliser, due to inflation and Putin's invasion of Russia, yet they still work hard and do their absolute best to provide for us. We should be incredibly proud of our farmers. I fully support them, especially those in my constituency, who I know work tirelessly to support their local community. If they can support us, we must do the same back.

3.8 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on securing this debate. We cannot speak enough about the need to support our farmers, who produce the food we need in a way that is good for the country and our health. We talk regularly about the need to support our farmers and landowners in producing more food. We also talk a lot about the need to protect and enhance our natural environment and countryside, which many of us are privileged to live in or represent; there does not need to be conflict between the two. Food production and biodiversity can complement each other; our mistake has been to give farmers the impression that they bear responsibility for our countryside and natural environment declining, and their job to fix it. I disagree, but there is no denying that consumers, driven by supermarkets and Government policy on inflation, hunger for ever cheaper food; they often want to pay less than the cost of producing it—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax).

Farmers face unparalleled challenges and are fighting fires, barely surviving each challenge as it rolls over them. They have little time to think, plan and change the way they produce the food we need. As a result, small farmers in Cornwall are handing over their land to large contractors to farm. I see a significant number of farmers reducing the amount of food they plan to produce this year and next, and lots of farmers are leaving dairy altogether. The production of potatoes and dairy, which are essential to our daily diet, has reduced enormously in Cornwall.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend makes the point that we need to build more national food resilience. It is preposterous that in the 1980s we were producing 78% of what we consumed, but now the figure has fallen to 60%. The grant funding discussed earlier would help farmers, particularly in respect of automation, and allow them, once they have become more productive and efficient, to challenge the power of the supermarkets, which have distorted the food chain. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to rebalance the food chain in favour of primary producers?

Derek Thomas: I do agree, and that was the subject of one of the first debates I ever secured in this place, back in 2015. Given how farmers' plans have shifted in the last 18 months, I suspect that less than 60% of the food we consume is grown in the UK.

Urgent action is needed. I am glad to see the Minister in his place; I met him first thing this morning to discuss a similar issue. One thing that was said this morning, and with which I completely agree, is that food security should and must be adopted as a public good, so that we can focus Government funding and support for farmers in order to deliver food security across our nation.

As has been mentioned, we also need a determined effort to maximise high-quality food production—not just to feed our nation but to do so in a healthy way. We know that our NHS is not properly coping with the demands we place on it, and it will not get any better until we really look at our diet, the food we produce and our gut health. It is a massive issue, and the Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, will be looking at soil quality and how it affects gut health.

We need to attract talent, especially in opening up the opportunity to embrace science and innovation, and to harvest the food we need. I go into schools all the time, and so much work needs to be done across the Department for Education, schools, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other Government Departments to make farming and food production a key conversation in primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and our homes. Parents also have a real opportunity to talk to their children about jobs in the food and farming sector.

Finally, we need to restore the relationship between the state, Government agencies and non-governmental organisations, so that farmers know they are vital and that we recognise they are vital to our national security and health. They should be supported to transition to modern, sustainable and productive farming and food production. We will not be forgiven by those living in the countryside if we fail to support them and to enable them to play the role they want to play, and are keen to play, in feeding the nation and making the countryside a place that is both secure at home and generous to the world around us.

3.13 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), who is almost my constituency neighbour, and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I declare my interest as a tenant beef farmer's son in my home constituency.

Although I could talk a lot about farming across the board, particularly beef and sheep farming, I want to focus my remarks on egg production and the effects we are starting to see. Some people say the situation has been caused by avian flu, but I would like to share some other aspects of the debate that may help to inform the discussion. The egg industry has been going through a period of turbulence for some time. In my opinion, it is because the supermarkets control the supply chain, totally dominate the market and force producers to accept a price at which they cannot afford to produce. I am afraid it highlights the fact that the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which I spoke so strongly in favour of in my maiden speech in February 2020, is proving to be totally ineffective.

Most of my local farmers in West Dorset tell me they do not want to receive Government subsidies, but they have to. Why do they have to? More often than not, they are forced into that position because the Groceries Code Adjudicator is not doing its job and is allowing supermarkets to dominate the field in such a way that farmers cannot continue to provide the goods that we all need to consume. In effect, in my opinion the Government are ultimately subsidising supermarket profits. That has to stop.

We all know that egg production costs have risen. Rising energy costs, the war in Ukraine and inflation have clearly all had an effect on that. But we cannot continue in a situation where large supermarkets' strong yield-management policies are forcing this to occur. It is not new. Only a few days ago, the British Retail Consortium confirmed that

“some UK supermarkets are putting limits on egg purchases due to shortages largely linked”

[Chris Loder]

to the avian influenza pandemic. Well, I do not agree with that. It is wrong. I think supermarkets are hiding behind that explanation a total failure in their yield-management strategies of probably many months, if not longer.

In West Dorset, a number of egg producers have told me that it is now so difficult for them to make money. Let me to put that into context: supermarkets broadly have raised the price of a dozen eggs by 50p over the past six months. The British Free Range Egg Producers Association says that farmers and producers are receiving just 18p of that, in the light of all the additional production costs they are having to bear. They cannot therefore do things like invest in pullets—new young stock—to ensure the future. This has basically resulted in a gradual 13% reduction in egg production over the past year alone. That is not solely because of avian influenza.

Jim Shannon: I have a number of egg producers in my constituency as well. If they sell their eggs locally to smaller shops, they can get a good price—for instance, £1 has been increased to £1.89. That is an increase that smaller shops have made, but the larger supermarkets are hellbent on screwing the producers to such an extent that they will no longer be in business. It is the big boys that need to be taken on.

Chris Loder: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman's remarks, which concur with my thoughts. I am afraid this is the beginning of a ticking time bomb. If ever there was a time that this House had to urge the Government to give the Groceries Code Adjudicator the teeth it needs to sort this mess out, it is now. If we think there is difficulty in the market today, I can assure this Chamber that in less than 12 months' time we will not be in a situation where we have a reduction in eggs available for sale to consumers—we will be lucky if we have any eggs on the shelves at all.

Sir John Hayes: Before my hon. Friend concludes what is, as ever, a brilliant speech, I want to say that this does not just apply to eggs. The Groceries Code Adjudicator needs to intervene in respect of horticulture, cereals, livestock and a whole range of things in respect of which supermarkets are, as I said earlier, distorting the food chain. Will my hon. Friend ask this brilliant Minister—there is no one better in the House to do this—to use the powers that the Government already have to act in favour of farmers and growers?

Chris Loder: Yes, I will. The Minister has heard that request.

Finally, the NFU has called for a DEFRA investigation into the egg supply chain. The NFU is a bit late with that call, but I think it is right. I hope the Minister will take that on board. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) makes a very fair point: this is not just about eggs. Milk was 49p a pint maybe 18 months ago; it has gone up now to more than £1 a pint in most shops. Ask our dairy farmers if they have received that difference—no, they have not.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I call Gagan Mohindra. He and the final Back-Bench speaker have five minutes each.

3.19 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for securing this important debate.

It was not that long ago that throughout the House we were celebrating the Back British Farming campaign. I am conscious that I am probably one of the few people present who does not have a farming background or a link to farming, but as Members know the industry employs more than 4 million people and is worth around £120 billion to the national economy. In South West Hertfordshire, about 65% of our land use is for agriculture.

As someone who does not have many years of farming experience—definitely not as many as my right hon. Friend the Minister—I have proactively spent several months learning a lot more about the industry. Back in June, I held a roundtable in conjunction with the NFU, and I think that a lot of the issues raised then are common throughout the country. They included rising costs, especially for fertiliser; the VAT threshold for those who decide to have farm shops; and rural crime, especially the theft of tools and caravans and the police response. I am lucky that in Hertfordshire we have as our police and crime commissioner David Lloyd, who is very proactive on that.

In a follow-up meeting with farmers in August, I went to the P. E. Mead farm, where they farm more than 800 acres. Although it does not feel warm today, a key issue then was heatwaves and how the changing weather patterns will influence farming in the future. I am conscious that although the Minister is an excellent farmer in his own right, he may not necessarily have the answers, but I wish to put on his radar such important issues from across the industry. Where appropriate, we need to think about how the Government can best support farmers to deal with them.

One of the other things that I did during the recess was work experience: I spent a day with farmers at the PE Mead farm so that I could fully appreciate the trials and tribulations of farmers. As mentioned earlier, mental health is a really massive issue. The Office for National Statistics figures from back in 2015 suggested that suicide rates for male farmers were three times higher than the national average. That cannot be right. We need to think about what more we can do to support this vital industry. Unfortunately, we have seen with the war in Ukraine that food security will continue to be a massive issue. Although there is pressure for the development or change of land usage, my worry is that we are losing a skillset that is really important. Once it is lost, it is lost forever.

I have a personal plea to the Minister on education. One of the few pieces of casework that I have been really successful on is in respect of school catchment areas. I had the case of a young child whose parents were farmers and had to live on the farm, but because of the farm's location they were outside the catchment area for the school that the child wanted to go to. To me, that feels like penalising a family and their children for doing the right thing and ensuring that we have continued food security. I would be grateful if the Minister could take that point away and speak to his colleagues in the Department for Education about how

we can ensure that when someone is involved in critical infrastructure related to things such as food production, they have the ability to make appeals about education catchment areas and have their situation considered.

I shall finish there because I am sure that my learned colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), has more to say.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Last but definitely not least, I call Dr Neil Hudson.

3.23 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on securing this important debate.

I am proud to represent a large rural constituency, as a constituency MP and as a Member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. My constituency has a huge farming footprint. Our farmers in Cumbria and across the UK produce food to the highest standards with the highest animal welfare standards, and we should be very proud of that fact. I pay tribute to all farmers in Penrith and The Border and across the UK for all that they do. We must remember that during the pandemic farmers were classified as key workers, and they should be classified as key workers in the future.

The cost of living, which we have heard a lot about today, is really affecting the input costs for farmers. They are not immune to such costs, which include fertiliser, animal feed, fuel and energy. The Government support in recent months—such as the energy schemes, the bringing forward of the basic payment scheme payments, the new slurry grants and the fertiliser rule changes—has been very welcome and much needed, but I stress to the Minister that the Government need to continue to provide the support that farmers need during this crisis.

We have been supporting farmers through these challenging times, and as the funding systems change it is so important that we help farmers through those changes. I have seen at first hand in Cumbria how the new environmental land management schemes can work really well for local communities, and the farming in protected landscapes scheme is very welcome in Cumbria. This issue has been a big focus of the EFRA Committee. The current situation makes it even more crucial that the payments under such schemes are set at a fair and sufficient level and are a proper reward for producing the public goods that communities rely on. It is important—our Committee has been pushing the Government hard on this—that we support all types of farmers, including tenant farmers, commoners and upland farmers.

From talking to farmers in my constituency and across Cumbria, I know that there has been a lot of anxiety during this time. I have hosted regular roadshows with them, and I visit livestock markets regularly. I have triggered an EFRA Committee inquiry on the ELMS transition period. Sadly, I think some of that anxiety and negativity is being fuelled by people briefing against the payment system and misleading people on the levels of uptake.

I was pleased to question the Minister and Janet Hughes, the senior DEFRA official involved, at the EFRA Committee meeting last week. There is a 30% uptake of the environmental schemes, both existing and new.

The uptake on the new sustainable farming incentive is not as high as that because it started only this summer. I would welcome the Minister reaffirming the point that we want to encourage people to enrol in those schemes and then inform them so the schemes can be improved. It would be welcome if the Minister said we were looking into levels of payment to help farmers through this period.

We have heard a lot about food security in this debate. The issue came into sharp relief in the pandemic and has been highlighted again by the war in Ukraine. Bolstering our food security is a prime priority for the Government. The EFRA Committee has been looking at this—we are in the middle of a food security inquiry—and has heard about supplies of fertiliser to the United Kingdom. We have two plants in the UK: the one in Ince has been mothballed and the other in Billingham has ceased ammonia production. That is critical infrastructure for our country, and I urge the Government to keep watching that. We must also remember that a by-product of fertiliser production is CO₂, which is much needed by the food and beverage industry. It is also needed in the slaughter process for poultry and pigs, so there is an animal health and welfare implication. We need to secure that supply as well.

On animal health and welfare, I declare an interest as a veterinary surgeon. To support British farming, we need to have healthy animals. I welcome the Government's progress in that area. The new animal health and welfare pathway scheme, as part of the new ELMS, is very welcome, formalising the partnership between vets and farmers. But more can be done, such as responding to the calls for investing in animal health infrastructure—we heard the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) make that point.

As a member of the EFRA Committee, I guested on the Public Accounts Committee for the inquiry on the situation at the Animal and Plant Health Agency headquarters in Weybridge. It needs a radical and drastic refurbishment, and I urge the Government to make that a key priority. I have seen this at first hand: I came into politics on the back of my experiences in the foot and mouth crisis, and I witnessed things that I never want to see again in my lifetime. The APHA needs to be funded. The Weybridge site is pivotal in our attack and defence against infectious disease. We see that critically now with the avian influenza crisis. I pay tribute to the vets, officials and farmers on the frontline in that horrendous crisis. Funding that infrastructure is so important; this is about animals and people. We have to remember that diseases can transfer from animals to people. That work looks at public health and antimicrobial resistance.

We have heard a lot about rural mental health; the impact of infectious diseases and outbreaks have a massive impact on our rural communities. I urge the Government to look at that.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to our farmers. It is possible to produce food and look after the environment at the same time. We produce food to the highest animal welfare standards. As a Government, we must keep our arms around our farmers and ensure we support them moving forward.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues for your co-operation; we have come in on time and on budget. We now turn to the Front Benches.

3.29 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Gary; I will ensure that trend is kept to. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on securing a thoughtful and fascinating debate. The conclusion of all this is that British farmers still need support, and what they have received thus far is not sufficient to ensure that we have good farming practice.

I feel like a veteran at some of these debates. I have only been doing this job for the past few weeks, but the same themes seem to come up. Quite rightly, there is a tension between food production and biodiversity, and there are issues about the costs of supermarkets and concerns about food security and poor mental health among the farming community.

There were a couple of things that did not come up. One that I want to mention, which only the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) brought up, is the concerns about ELMS payments. I thought that would be a focus of much of today's debate, but until the hon. Member rose, there was no mention of it all. I am sure the Minister is more than aware of the some of the concerns and anxieties about ELMS. Farmers are saying clearly that they need to know what will happen, so that they can plan their businesses and know whether they will have a viable future, so I was quite surprised that that was not brought up.

I am absolutely not surprised at all that the other huge issue that did not come up—the one that probably has the most impact on agriculture and farming across the whole of Britain and UK—was Brexit. I am not surprised that Conservative Members do not bring it up, because they would have to acknowledge that the past few years have not been their greatest. Brexit has had such a negative impact on everything to do with agriculture, food security, the wellbeing of rural communities and exports—with everything to do with food and drink. We know that things are bad. We only need to listen to the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), when he lamented the poor deal that was struck with Australia and said—this was testament to his powers of understatement—that it was “not...very good”.

That deal was more than not very good; it was a disaster for sheep and cattle producers, and for beef and lamb exports. The one-sided nature of the deal struck with Australia has allowed cheap imports to come flooding into this country and given nothing in return for the hard work of British farmers up and down the countryside. I am not surprised that Conservative Members do not mention Brexit, because if I was them, I would stay well away from it too, because it has been a singular disaster for our friends.

We heard a lot about animals, which quite surprised me. I always like a debate about animals. My constituency in Perthshire was one of the first to secure the introduction of beavers. I know that there is some despondency and negativity around this—I hear a lot of that from farmers, who are impacted quite severely—but there are also benefits to attractions. I represent the biggest river tributary system in the whole of the UK, in the Tay river and its tributaries, and some of the positive environmental outcomes of beavers are there to be seen. There is almost

a small tourist industry set up around them, so that people can walk round and see some of the work of the beavers, so while there are issues and management is of course necessary, it is not all doom and gloom.

I heard the profound words of the hon. Member for East Devon —“You can't eat trees”—but tell that to the beavers, the bears, the giraffes and the many insects that feast upon our woodlands on a daily basis, if not every minute of the day. Let us not be so negative and despondent about some of the reintroductions of wildlife, because this will be ongoing. There are proposals and plans for further introductions. The sea eagle in Scotland has been a great reintroduction. I know that there are issues—it all comes down to the tension between the introduction of wildlife and the management of land—but we have seen positive impacts, particularly through tourism and people coming to watch this magnificent bird flying the skies once again over Scotland, so let us not have all this doom and gloom when it comes to reintroductions.

I listened to the message from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) about eggs, and he is right. The crisis in egg production did not start with avian flu; it has been ongoing for years, although it is most definitely exacerbated by avian flu. I know that we will have a debate next week, when we will probably all be back together again, including the Minister—I always enjoy our little get-togethers—and discussing this more at length, but avian flu has had a massive impact, and not just on the turkey and farmed poultry sector, but on eggs. I think it is the NFU that is now calling—and it is right to do so—for an urgent investigation into making an exceptional market conditions declaration under the Agriculture Act 2020, given the severe disruption to egg production that UK consumers are experiencing. I hope that is listened to very carefully.

But I will say one thing: we are different in Scotland. We are not run by DEFRA—for which we can give perhaps something of a sigh of a relief when it comes to these things. We are responsible for all the rural decisions that we make. We are responsible for Scottish agriculture, and it is us who will make those decisions, which will be the right ones for the farmers and agriculture communities that we represent. Scotland has taken a different approach. We have not taken the three-pronged ELMS approach, which has been a feature of the Agriculture Act.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, we are currently consulting on our new piece of agricultural legislation. One thing, among a couple of others, to come out of that consultation so far is a decision to continue with a single payment that will match EU funding up to at least 2025. We have looked at the three prongs of the Agriculture Act and we feel that it is not the way to go. Indeed, we find that there are difficulties associated with much of that. We will do that differently. We will have food production at the core of how we take this forward. NFU Scotland came to the Scottish Parliament last week to tell us very clearly that this is what it wants to see when we design the new legislation. We listened very carefully, and I hope we will be able to satisfy NFU Scotland that a commitment to food production will be at the very heart of the legislation that we bring forward.

We have our own system of grants and support that we are putting forward in Scotland, and we are able to do that. I hope that will be recognised as we go forward.

Dr Hudson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Pete Wishart: I do not have time, I am sorry.

The last theme I want to mention comes up very often in these debates and that is the shortage of labour. I am sorry to Conservative colleagues, but this is another consequence of their Brexit. I think they know that. They are not prepared to accept it and say that this is a difficult issue because of it, but ending freedom of movement with Brexit has probably been the biggest single disaster that we have visited on rural communities.

I represent a huge rural constituency. I have got strath, fantastic agriculture farming, hill farming and many hospitality businesses. Every single one of them has told me that they cannot get the labour they require because we have ended freedom of movement. What has happened is that people they had who were stalwarts of their sector and businesses have left, and there is nothing there to replace it. In the Scottish Parliament, we want to establish a new rural immigration pilot.

One of the discussions we have had today is about the independence of Scotland. We cannot do this pilot, and we are so frustrated we cannot do this because we are bound by decisions taken in the Home Office, which we have very little influence over. We need to do something. The seasonal agricultural workers scheme has helped, but it is insufficient. We need more people to come across here. It is not just the seasonal staff, it is the permanent staff we have in the agriculture business, such as vets and people who work in abattoirs. All of them are suffering because they cannot get the appropriate labour. I am pleased that we are only partly impacted by decisions that are taken by DEFRA, but we are heavily impacted by decisions taken by the Home Office and some of the arrangements that were put forward around Brexit.

We will continue to work on our agriculture Bill, and maybe when we come back to discuss these issues in the future we will be able to detail more about how we are approaching this, the difference we are hoping to make and how we are hoping to serve Scottish farmers.

3.37 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for securing this debate. We had many positive contributions from across the floor. They echo many of the points that have been made from Labour Benches over the last few years, whether that be on labour supply, trade deals or the importance of food production. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on echoing Labour's cry to make, buy and sell more in Britain, and milk from the Hills will certainly be part of that. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on convening his farmers groups. I wish him luck with the Minister. Should he be unlucky, I am very happy to oblige whenever he requires.

I will come to the future later, but let us start with the present. What are we seeing, and where is the support for British farming? Frankly, farming is hurting at the moment. There may be good prices for some, but there is still no respite, particularly for those in the pig sector. It is a very grim time for poultry farmers. Avian flu is horrible, and we know the APHA is struggling. As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central and

the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), I am afraid that last week the Secretary of State ducked my question of what happens if we get another disease outbreak. Crossing fingers and hoping it does not happen does not constitute a plan.

We should not allow avian flu to be a cover for the longer term problems egg producers have been highlighting for many months. Back in the spring, egg producers warned retailers that costs were running ahead of prices. At the egg and poultry fair, retailers failed to show up. They were replaced with cardboard cut-outs. It is a failure in the food system. What have the Government done? Nothing. The Agriculture Act was supposed to produce action on supply chain fairness, but all we have had is consultations and no outcomes.

I ask the Minister once again: where is the dairy code? Where is the pork supply chain code? Can he confirm that the draft proposal to move the Grocery Code Adjudicator into the Competition and Markets Authority is dead? Or is that yet another thing that the "Department for Running Away From Any Problem"—DEFRA as it was formerly known—does not know the answer to? At first I thought the points the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) made about the GCA were slightly unfair, but he pointed out that it does not have the powers it needs, exactly as we argued during the passage of the Agriculture Act.

On trade, we know about the lack of support for British farming, because the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), did not mince his words last week. He said that

"overall, the truth of the matter is that the UK gave away far too much for far too little in return...We did not need to give Australia or New Zealand full liberalisation in beef and sheep—it was not in our economic interest to do so, and neither Australia nor New Zealand had anything to offer"—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

I admire his candour. I just wish he had listened to the many organisations, including the Opposition, that made exactly the same points at the time, not many months after the Conservatives sold out British farming. No wonder so many are so furious; they are right to be.

There are more made in Britain—or rather made in Marsham Street—gaffes that are undermining British farming. Look at the meat export sector. I was at Lancaster auction mart last week to see the sheep auctions and to hear from farmers at first hand about the problems they face. There are not just high input costs, fertiliser costs and labour shortages, as if they were not enough. The latest is the gold-plating of rules for export into Europe. If that is not resolved by 13 December, it will kill the export trade. Will the Minister tell us what he is doing to resolve the situation?

How do the growers feel about the support they are getting? The NFU published a report this week showing that many are walking away from contracts and cutting production by as much as 20%. They cite a whole range of extra costs, including fertiliser, wages, packaging and transport, but the killer is energy. Farmers in competitor countries have support from their Governments, but here there is no certainty beyond a few months. The Minister knows full well that farming is a long-term businesses in which decisions about whether to plant are made many months ahead. Without certainty, the only sensible decision

[Daniel Zeichner]

for too many will be not to plant. The end result is that this country will be less secure and will depend more on imports, almost certainly produced to lower standards, just as we warned during the passage of the Agriculture Act.

I could give many more examples, but let me conclude by looking briefly at future prospects. To replace basic payments under the common agriculture policy, a new system was introduced under the Agriculture Act. The intellectual case for moving away from direct support was couched in terms of public money for public goods, and we agreed with the broad principle, but we argued then—we believe we have been vindicated by subsequent events—that food security is a public good. I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) endorse that point.

Frankly, it was never clear whether the Government believed that a volatile and vital sector such as food production requires direct Government support or just indirect support through environmental schemes. The problem now is that they seem to be achieving neither. The ELMS saga has played out in public view over recent months. The headlines in last week's *Farmers Guardian* screamed out: "ELM uproar" and "New Ministers tear up scheme plans". Perhaps the Minister can tell us what is going on. Perhaps the Minister can also tell us why Parliament is always the last place to be told. Is it true that there will be an announcement on 1 December? If so, are we invited?

Informed sources—I include the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border in that—tell me that the changes may not be as dramatic as the headlines suggest, but perhaps the Minister can clarify that. Is tier 2 ELMS being replaced by countryside stewardship? If so, is that the genuine nature recovery network system promised in the Environment Act 2021? If not, how is it supposed to work? What is happening with tier 3—the landscape recovery part of ELMS? Has it been postponed, scrapped or scaled down? Perhaps the Minister can tell us.

Replacing more than 80,000 schemes under basic payments with just a couple of thousand so far under the sustainable farming incentive leaves a whopping almost £1 billion hole in the rural economy. To some extent, I echo what the hon. Member for South Dorset said. Frankly, is that what the Conservatives mean by supporting British farming? I wonder.

What assessment has been made of the impact of all this? Does the Minister know? I have asked him before and I ask him again: what assessment has his Department made of the economic impact so far on the rural economy? What assessment has been made of the environmental impact? I do not think we will get an answer because I know the answer: none and none.

Under this Government, support for farmers and the rural economy is haemorrhaging. The failures of this Government make them a threat to our farmers, undermine our food security and, despite the heroic efforts of the staff in the agencies, are leaving us dangerously exposed in the event of further animal disease outbreaks. Our farmers deserve support. They are not getting it at the moment, but they will with a Labour Government.

3.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for securing the debate. I was going to start by saying that we have seen the Chamber at its best today: we have seen a huge amount of celebration of and positivity about UK agriculture. I am sorry that the speech made by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) soured that mood, to be honest.

Daniel Zeichner: It is the truth.

Mark Spencer: The truth is that if the hon. Gentleman looks around him, he will see how many members of the Labour party are here to provide support, and how many members of the Conservative party are here. Seeing how many Conservative Back Benchers have come to take part in this very important debate demonstrates how important rural communities are to the Conservative party and to this Government.

I will respond to the hon. Gentleman later; I will start by commenting on the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon. He talked about how the new schemes are going to change the way in which we farm. This will be an exciting moment in UK agriculture: we will move in a direction where we can balance growing food—food security is a very important part of our agricultural production and our supply chains, and it will continue to be so going forward—with improving our environment and our biodiversity.

The good news is that UK farmers are very much up for that fight. They want to get involved in it, and are very proud of the landscapes they have created. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) who made reference to people criticising farmers and saying that they are the problem. He hit the nail on the head: farmers are part of the solution. The beautiful rolling landscapes that we see in Cumbria and in Devon are not there by accident, but because farmers have created those landscapes through the way in which they have produced food for generation after generation. The beautiful stone walls in North Yorkshire are not there for decoration, but to keep sheep in. We need to recognise that and celebrate it, and help and support our farmers through this process, because they are up for the fight.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Devon went on to talk about trade Bills. I would put a much more positive spin on this than the hon. Member for Cambridge.

Daniel Zeichner: Or the former Secretary of State.

Mark Spencer: The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), was a very good Secretary of State. He fought tooth and nail on behalf of UK farmers during those debates, and secured a number of concessions from the Government on that journey. What we have been left with is a trade deal with Australia and New Zealand that has brought those countries closer to us and allowed us to co-operate and work with them, which will give us huge opportunities in future. There are massive markets around the world in Asia and North America where we can sell top-quality UK beef

and lamb, working with Australia and New Zealand—which have the opposite seasonal activity to us—to supply those markets. Bringing them closer through those trade deals is the first step on that journey, and I am very proud of what UK farmers produce. We should celebrate that and make the most of it in trying to exploit those markets moving forward.

Turning to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), I am delighted that his son is going to agricultural college—did he say Askham Bryan? I think he just said that it was a college in North Yorkshire, but I hope it is Askham Bryan, which I know is a very good college. If there was ever a moment when we needed bright young people to come into our sector—the next generation to take us forward—this is it, and I celebrate the fact that the hon. Gentleman has family getting involved in the sector. We should do all we can to encourage that. One of the first meetings I had when I took over as Minister was with the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs, looking at some of the work it is doing to encourage young people into the sector. It is also very in tune with some of the mental health challenges that young people and farmers in rural communities are facing. Anything I can do in this job to help it on that journey, I will do.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central also talked about biosecurity, which is very important when it comes to dealing with avian influenza: anything we can do to increase the biosecurity of some of our professional poultry units is to be welcomed. He went on to talk about African swine fever, which is a challenge that is spreading across Europe. That is why on 1 August this year, we changed the rules: we did a spot check on items coming into the UK to see how much illegal or unregistered pork meat was coming in, and have now changed the rules so that no one can import more than 2 kg at a time. Border Force employees are on their toes, looking for any violations of those rules to make sure we keep the UK safe from African swine fever—it would be a disaster if we ended up with it.

There has been a lot of talk about seasonal workers; clearly, I am not in a position to announce those figures, but we are in close discussions with our friends in the Home Office and hope to give clarity on that issue as soon as possible. That neatly takes me to the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). She started with a series of massive plugs for her constituency and the great food producers of Essex, including Tiptree, which I do recognise as one of the premium jam producers in the world, not just the country. She went on to talk about avian influenza. It is fair to say that Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk have been at the epicentre of that disaster. My heart goes out to those poor farmers who have found themselves victims of that terrible virus. The good news, from a national point of view, is that we have robust supply chains in place. There will be turkeys for Christmas. There are some challenges in the goose market, but the chicken market is also fine.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who always attends these debates, is a great advocate for his farmers and fishermen. He was the first to raise the Grocery Code Adjudicator, along with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who mentioned the adjudicator a number of times. It is important to understand what the Grocery

Code Adjudicator can and cannot do. Their role is to ensure that contracts that are entered into are adhered to appropriately and not violated.

If an egg producer has signed a contract at X per dozen eggs, the supermarket has the right to expect the producer to stand by that price. The producer could procure and secure the feed supply for the same period as the life expectancy of a laying hen, which is about 14 months. The producer could sign the contract for X amount per dozen, secure the price per tonne of feed and therefore protect the margin. The price of feed has gone up exponentially and farmers have reached the point where they must make a decision on whether to enter into a new contract for a new price or at the same price. About a year ago, many of them voted with their feet and said that they were not willing to sign up to that level of contract. The retailers made a mistake when they did not to see the huge challenge coming in the egg-supply market, and we are now seeing that.

What is the role of the Government? It is to encourage conversations between retailers, primary producers and wholesalers on a regular, monthly basis. The Secretary of State and I meet the farming unions, the hospitality sector, retailers and the processing sector to ensure that those conversations take place. I hope that that will continue to bear fruit, but I acknowledge there are challenges in the sector that are not linked to avian influenza.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) has been a great advocate for farming for a long time. He was one of those who celebrated my elevation to this position. So many people celebrated my arrival at the Dispatch Box, I felt like Ronaldo must have felt when he joined Man U and all the fans celebrated. I reflect on how that worked out in the end—let's see how that goes.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset talked about grant funding, and he will have seen today that we have announced some grant funding to help farmers improve slurry systems. We are very much committed to supporting farmers with capital expenditure to allow them to invest in new tech, especially if that will benefit animal welfare and the involvement of modern practices and technology in food production.

My hon. Friend went on to talk about bovine TB, of course. There is probably not enough time for me to get into that subject today, but what I will say is that we must use every tool in the box to fight bovine TB. That includes vaccinating badgers, it includes ensuring that we have improved biosecurity and it includes culling badgers where that is essential. We should be guided by the science and not by anything else—not by the calendar and not by political lobbying, but by the science. That is what the Government will do.

I think that, for the first time, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) managed to get to the right of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset when he committed to shooting every fox in Northern Ireland. I wish him well in his pursuit—[*Interruption.*] I know it was tongue in cheek. He is a huge advocate for the farmers of Northern Ireland, and they are great food producers. He also mentioned the price of fertiliser and the challenges with fertiliser, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who talked about CF Fertilisers. Yesterday I met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to see what we can do to co-operate

[Mark Spencer]

and work together to assist CF in ensuring that we continue to supply the nation with ammonium nitrate, nitric acid and carbon dioxide, which of course is very important.

I know that I am running out of time, but I want to make a couple of comments about my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, who talked about potato and dairy farmers leaving the sector and the importance of education. Education of our consumers is one area where we could criticise the agricultural sector. I do not think that we have done a very good job as farmers—I put my hand up as one of those farmers—of ensuring that our consumers understand how and where our food is produced. We have to do better to ensure that the next generation fully understands where and how our food is produced. Education was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra).

My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border talked about grant schemes, which I hope I have mentioned. He also mentioned the work of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which is under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill). It continues to be a great critical friend of the Department, and I would encourage it to continue its great work.

My hon. Friend for Penrith and The Border also talked about the reward for—that is, payments for—hedgerows and so on. I hope that when we announce the new schemes, which I hope will be very soon, he will see the fruits of those discussions. I am very keen to ensure that farmers want to take part in the schemes and feel part of the solution. But money is not the only barrier. I think that we can help, assist with, and tweak some farming practices. Hedgerows are a good example. It is not just about money; it is about being able to get on to the land and cut the hedges at the right time. If we can fund and assist with wildlife strips by the side of the hedgerows, it is possible to cut a hedgerow in January and February without running on to the commercial crop. That has the added benefit of creating a wildlife corridor and leaving berries and so on the hedgerows for wild birds to feed on during that time.

I think I have run out of time—apart from for mentioning the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who gave us his rant about Brexit once again. We will have to come back to that on another occasion, but I enjoy the same loop of conversation we have with him every time.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister. We now turn to Simon Jupp, who will have the final word.

3.58 pm

Simon Jupp: Thank you, Sir Gary. I thank everyone who took part in the debate to demonstrate our support for the British farming industry. If I may, I will highlight a couple of people who made remarkable remarks. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) mentioned mental health. That is an increasingly big problem in the farming sector. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) mentioned supermarkets' pricing structures. They have had their jam; it is time that farmers had some, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) mentioned uncertainties over subsidies and also made a plea to continue the badger cull—a message well heard in the west country. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not a fan of foxes, made a number of good points about agriculture in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) made excellent points about the Groceries Code Adjudicator, on which I have been informed this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) told us about his experience of working on a farm—I am sure it was utterly brilliant. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) talked about food security, and rightly so. I highlighted that issue in my speech. And finally, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) seems to disagree with the referendum result—'twas ever thus, Sir Gary.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for British farming.

Tourism Industry: Devon and Cornwall

4 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I will call Kevin Foster to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. I call Kevin Foster.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the tourism industry in Devon and Cornwall.

It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary.

Why this debate? Although our two counties might be bitterly divided over how to best eat a scone—our friends across the Tamar do not recognise that cream first is the only way to do it—we are united in a shared interest in seeing our tourism sectors thrive. After all, Devon and Cornwall are the most popular destinations for domestic tourism. That means tourism is a key employer for our two counties, representing 10% of all employment in Devon and 20% in Cornwall, with many jobs in other sectors relying on the trade created by providing services to that vital sector.

The scale of the visitor-related spend should not be underestimated; across the wider south-west peninsula, it was an estimated total of £7.3 billion in 2019. It is not only visitors from across the UK who make a big impact on Devon and Cornwall's tourism sector. International travel contributed £2.5 billion to the south-west's regional economy in gross value added, equivalent to 3.8% of total gross value added in the area. Given those numbers, it is encouraging to note that international travel in the south-west region is forecast to grow 15% by 2027 compared with 2019 levels.

Such debates often just list the problems, so I should mention the positives before I turn to the challenges. Today is not about asking for a Government subsidy for a failing business or an industry that has not adapted to changing markets and consumer choices. It is about how we can take forward a positive future for the tourism industry in our two counties and not lose it to some short-term challenges. For example, Torbay is seeing a level of private investment in building large new hotels that has not been seen for decades. Last year, a large new hotel opened on Torquay's harbourside. Large new purpose-built hotels will shortly open on Paignton's esplanade, the first to be built there since the modern borough of Torbay was formed in the late 1960s.

Other large hotel projects are either planned or already under construction, with the Fragrance Group alone investing approximately £140 million in Torbay—a real vote of confidence in our bay's future. We are also seeing new businesses opening on our harboursides to serve customers looking for both traditional and more contemporary dining experiences, plus our attractions are innovating to attract new customers and respond to the challenges of the last two years, driven by the pandemic along with changing demand such as for online ticketing.

Tourism businesses can also have wider social impacts beyond the employment and business activity they create. For example, the Wild Planet Trust, which runs Paignton's and Newquay's zoos, is dedicated to helping halt species

decline. Zoos that in decades past were simply attractions where, for a fee, we could see exotic animals or plants collected from the wild are now places that aim to inspire their visitors to think globally and ecologically while using the revenues generated to provide a vital safety net from extinction for many endangered species as well as, we hope, the reintroduction of some that have been lost to war, hunting or destruction of habitats globally. Similarly, Torbay's status as a UNESCO geopark not only helps attract those who wish to have a holiday in a unique space but provides a superb location for the study of its detailed geology, with accommodation and services provided by our tourism sector to support it.

It would be odd not to at least briefly mention Torbay's famous queen of crime writing, Dame Agatha Christie, whose legacy across south Devon still sees many sites visited by her fans to see the locations that inspired her, including the Paignton Picture House, one of Europe's most historic cinema buildings, which, after a generation lying derelict, is now being revitalised by a combination of the passionate team at the Paignton Picture House Trust and about £4 million of support from the Government.

All that positivity must be seen against the challenges faced by existing and new businesses across our two counties, while bearing in mind that those challenges follow the impact of the pandemic, which saw an average decrease of 52% in turnover of tourism businesses in the south-west, with many businesses still facing repayments on loans taken out simply to survive. Only today we have heard news that the Devon Valley holiday park in Shaldon, south Devon, will not be opening for the 2023 season. Several factors behind the decision have been cited, including significant increases in the electricity bill.

Let me outline some of the challenges. The obvious one to start with is energy and rising prices. For many businesses, Putin's attack on Ukraine and the resulting spike in energy prices have had a big impact—costs that cannot be recovered simply by increasing prices. Earlier this year I heard from many local businesses, big and small, that faced dramatic increases in their energy bills, with the price of gas potentially up more than tenfold compared with their previous fixed price.

The energy price guarantee has made a big difference; one business owner said that it meant that they would be staying open. However, the Government must look at the realities of the sector as they consider the review of the EPG, due in early 2023. Take, for example, the Meadfoot Bay hotel in Torquay. To compensate for an increase of £80,000 in utility costs, it would need to sell another 550 bed nights, or 1,700 covers in its brasserie, over the coming year. In a buoyant market, that would be a big target for a hotel with 14 bedrooms; in the midst of a recession, it is simply not going to happen. In short, the hotel could face making a loss not because it is not innovating or providing good services to its customers, but because a bill for a basic need of its business has increased dramatically for reasons well beyond its control.

Energy bills are not the only ones that are rising. Food and maintenance bills and other costs are also increasing, presenting a real challenge for hospitality businesses. The next challenge that I want to highlight is business rates; I doubt whether the Minister will be surprised to hear that I am bringing up a tax on doing

[Kevin Foster]

business from a premises. Trading from a premises is something that tourism and hospitality businesses across Devon and Cornwall have to do by default—a night out online with a computer is not likely to be as attractive as a night out at the pub or a physical business. Fundamentally, such things cannot be moved online. Often it is the business rates bill, enforced through the magistrates court, that finally tips a business over. Landlords might offer a rent cut if necessary and suppliers might cut a payment deal—it is often business rates, which must be paid simply to exist, that are the final blow for a business.

The moves by the Chancellor last week are welcome—extending and increasing from 50% to 75% business rates relief for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, for example. I note that that will benefit 230,000 retail, hospitality and leisure properties, which will be eligible to receive increased support worth a total of approximately £2.1 billion. Yet more is needed to ensure that businesses that must operate from a premises have a level playing field.

On the subject of buildings, it is worth starting to reflect on the impact that competition from Airbnb-style operations can have, particularly when short-term holiday lets are created in what were long-term homes for families. Although a certain level of such property is welcome and provides customer choice, there is now a real danger that unregulated growth is bringing negative effects—for example, working families being effectively evicted from a house that has for many years provided a home for rent, to allow a landlord to offer short-term holiday lets instead. The issue is not about avoiding competition. Unrestricted growth not only endangers the local housing supply, but undermines those holiday accommodation providers who, for sensible reasons, must comply with a range of safety regulations that do not apply in domestic properties.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I must say that I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the unrestricted growth of the short-term holiday let is of some concern, including to my constituents working in the tourism industry. Katie Parsons, who runs Blackdown Yurts, welcomed the Government review into short-term tourism accommodation announced in June, particularly as safety regulations apply differently. However, there are more than 8,000 Airbnb properties in Devon. Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, want to hear from the Minister a date by which that Government review will be published?

Kevin Foster: I agree entirely with my friend from Tiverton and Honiton. It is good to see him here taking part in the debate. We would like to hear a date. I have probably given away slightly where I think the review should go by signing new clause 22 to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which is before the House at the moment. I believe that it would be right to move to a position where converting a residential property into a short-term holiday let comes under the remit of planning. It seems rather bizarre that a whole street could effectively be converted into a holiday park, removing that accommodation from the local housing market.

I think a proportionate response would be to move to having a separate category, which would also allow more appropriate consideration of things such as the balance of regulations that should apply. My uncle served in the Plymouth and then the Devon fire service for 20-odd years, so I know there are very good reasons why we have the fire safety regulations that we have for holiday accommodation, and I know that the legislation was brought in as a result of hard experience, particularly back in the 1960s and 1970s.

It would certainly be good to have a date for the review's publication. I will leave the Minister under no impression that my mind is not already rather made up on at least one of the outcomes that we probably need to see, and potentially on a registration process, but I very much look forward to hearing from him. I appreciate that planning is probably outside his precise remit, but it is a challenge that we face.

The final challenge is consumer confidence. We must not underestimate its impact. Booking a holiday will be the last thing on anyone's mind if they are worrying about how they will pay their heating bill. Moves to stimulate confidence and growth in the economy are needed to build confidence in potential tourism customers, including local residents, who can provide vital year-round trade to local tourism businesses.

Let us reflect on what these challenges can result in. Holiday accommodation will not simply lie unused, and the challenges I have set out can result in pressure to use it for other things. A hotelier faced with a relatively light booking sheet can find it all too tempting to take on long-term guests, be they asylum seekers from the Home Office or those owed a housing duty by their local council.

I have been supporting Torbay Council's efforts to challenge the conversion of properties in our key tourism locations to longer-term accommodation on planning grounds. The objective is to prevent precedents from being set for the conversion of tourism-based accommodation that was designed for short stays into poor-quality longer-term accommodation. That often brings issues of housing standards and antisocial behaviour, while sometimes also helping to block regeneration efforts by giving a building that could have been acquired for a needed rebuild an income stream in its current poor condition. I hope that the Minister will engage with his colleagues in the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about how we can move away from such uses, which affect not only local communities but the tourism sector overall.

I know from responding to this type of debate myself that it is always good to provide a summary of what we are looking for. The first thing is business rates reform. The recent moves by the Chancellor were welcome, but how does the Minister see longer-term reform of business rates being taken forward? What representations are being made about how we end what is effectively a tax penalty for investing in sectors that require bricks and mortar?

The second thing we are looking for is real engagement on energy costs and future support schemes. It is welcome to see hospitality recognised, alongside traditional energy-intensive industries, as a sector that will need continuing support with energy prices. How does the Minister see engagement being done with the sector over the next

four months to identify the specific requirements of businesses both small and large, along with how a package could be appropriately targeted at them?

Then there is work to encourage consumers and local residents to use hospitality and tourism businesses where they can. I will be interested to know how the Government will work with the sector to promote its opportunities not only to potential domestic and international visitors, but to investors who could fund the future of our tourism sector. Finally, I am conscious that the Minister is still a relatively recent appointment, but how does he plan to engage with the sector on the range of issues affecting it?

I am delighted to have secured this opportunity to highlight both the opportunities and the challenges facing the tourism industry in Devon and Cornwall. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government will play their part in ensuring that the sector has a bright future in our region and, in due course, to welcoming him to see for himself what our two counties have to offer visitors.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing this important debate to discuss the benefits of tourism to areas such as Devon and Cornwall. I am aware that my hon. Friend is committed to supporting the tourism industry in his constituency. In his previous role as a Minister, he engaged with my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), on the importance of supporting its recovery.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay listed a number of reasons why it is good to visit Torbay and he has tempted me with a visit, which I hope to comment on a little later. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the strengths of Devon and Cornwall's tourism industry in the wider context of supporting the tourism offer in other regions of the United Kingdom.

I am the Minister responsible for sport, tourism, civil society, youth and many other issues, so Members will understand that the issues I cover are many and varied. I hope that they will forgive me if that sometimes causes confusion. One day I might be talking about the World cup in Qatar, and the next day I might be where I am now, debating tourism in Devon and Cornwall. To follow on from my hon. Friend's opening comments, I have to be careful not to mix up my speeches; I would not want to score any "scone goals". I hope that when I visit my hon. Friend's constituency next year, I will be able to come to a conclusion on whether cream or jam comes first.

Turning to the really important matters at hand, I want to outline the support the Government have provided to the tourism industry so far. I am aware that a large proportion of businesses in Devon and Cornwall—the English riviera, to be specific—still face challenges from the pandemic, in addition to rising energy costs, supply chain issues and the rise in the cost of living. The Government are absolutely committed to supporting businesses within our visitor economy, which is why last summer we developed the tourism recovery plan.

The south-west of England is a known popular tourism destination. Nearly one fifth of all trips made to England in 2019 were in the region, and that figure has been steadily increasing. That presents us with a huge opportunity to get visit numbers back to pre-pandemic levels by working on the plan's objectives. As we know, people see the south-west as an attractive destination for a holiday, and the Government have been working to build the sector back post covid and have kept in close contact with stakeholders to ensure that everyone is on board. However, we continue to take into account the new challenges that have emerged in the past year when assessing the sector's recovery.

The plan was a demonstration of our commitment to regain the UK's reputation post pandemic as one of the most desirable tourist destinations in the world. We know that we already have an outstanding offer; we just need to advertise and inform people of that offer.

We also want to go further by enhancing what we already offer to tourists so that the UK can reach its full potential. First, we have set out six key objectives. These include the short-term objective of bringing back domestic and international visitor spend as quickly as we can, and the medium to longer-term objectives of supporting the sector to become more resilient, accessible, sustainable and able to benefit every region and part of the United Kingdom. It is about growth, but it is also about productivity.

Secondly, we have started to talk more about the visitor economy rather than tourism as an ecosystem of transport, culture, heritage and hospitality. We believe that that will help to demonstrate how the sector can both contribute to economic growth and support the Government's objectives of levelling up.

Finally, improving our tourism offer in regions across the country will make us more attractive to potential visitors and event hosts, encourage a higher spend, reduce seasonality and promote investment. That will help to ensure that businesses chose the UK over other destinations, and I strongly believe that we must find ways to encourage international travellers to travel further than London and sample the excellent coastal tourism that areas such as Devon and Cornwall have to offer. This will no doubt bring benefits to such regions.

There are also other levers that the Government can pull. As announced in the Chancellor's autumn statement, the Government are in advanced discussions on mayoral devolution deals with local authorities in Cornwall. I look forward to hearing about further developments on these plans, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay is, too. There are also plans to help the tourism sector with targeted support to help with the cost of business rates over the next five years, worth more than £15 billion. The Government recognise that businesses are facing significant inflationary measures, so business rates multipliers will also be frozen in 2023-24, and ratepayers facing increased bills will have further support. I heard much about that at the UK Hospitality reception yesterday.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that Putin's war has caused the sector huge issues, which is why the energy bill relief scheme, announced earlier this year, is providing further support for businesses. As my hon. Friend will know, the scheme will provide support through the winter period, protecting businesses against excessive bills until March next year. A review will then be

[Stuart Andrew]

published that will consider how best to offer further support to exactly the types of hotels he mentioned. I will continue to have meetings with stakeholders and colleagues across Government to highlight the need for support.

Tourism is already a devolved policy area, but giving local regions more authority is one way to ensure that growth can be generated from the ground up. Members may be aware of Nick de Bois' independent review into the structure and organisation of destination management organisations. It was published in August 2021, and the Government responded in July, including with an accreditation framework to streamline and improve the DMO landscape. That will enable more efficient and strategic DMOs, ensuring that they can bring out the best in their local tourism offer. We will also be piloting a funded partnership model in a region of England to be announced on Friday. We hope to use that to collect evidence to showcase the success of the proposed model and to enable it to be rolled out to other regions.

My hon. Friend rightly talked about short-term lets. Cornwall and Devon's popularity as tourist spots is great for creating jobs and supporting businesses. However, I appreciate that not all of tourism's impacts are welcomed by local residents. As my hon. Friend will know, there has been a sharp increase in short-term holiday letting in recent years, which has been driven by the rise of online platforms such as Airbnb. While the Government support the sharing economy and the economic benefits that it can bring, we are aware of a variety of concerns, such as the impact on the housing market and local communities. During my time as Housing Minister, I was lobbied extensively on that by my hon. Friend and many other south-west MPs.

To address the concerns and to look towards potential solutions for short-term accommodation, we first needed to hear from all interested parties, so we held a call for evidence between June and September. The evidence has helped us to understand the scale and nature of the short-term letting market in England and the benefits and potential problems it is causing in communities across the country, including in the south-west. It has enabled us to hear from stakeholders and other interested parties about how the sector could be improved. We are now in the process of analysing the near 4,000 responses and will look to provide an update to the sector soon about the next steps.

Kevin Foster: It is encouraging to hear of the scale of response. Does the Minister agree that this is not about tourism versus housing? Ultimately, the availability of housing is vital to ensure that there are staff for the tourism industry.

Stuart Andrew: I completely understand that point. I have done several roundtables on the issue and heard the problems that colleagues face in their constituencies. We will continue to work with colleagues in DLUHC to find a solution.

I will move on to international travel, which is an important piece of work. We are working closely with other Departments to bring back international travellers to at least 2019 levels as quickly as possible. As we

know, that will promote growth and increase the UK's market share of both visitors and spending. Part of that work includes increasing international visitor numbers and spend outside of London and the south-east.

We also want to focus on reducing the seasonality aspect of tourism in this country by increasing off-season visits in the way that my hon. Friend described. Recent figures from VisitBritain show that the visitor economy is heavily skewed towards London and the south-east, with London accounting for 43% of all international inbound overnight stays and 64% of all international visitor spend. VisitBritain has analysed the regional disparity, which compares unfavourably with our competitors in France, Germany and Italy. Nevertheless, I am aware that, for many tourists, a typical trip to the UK involves a visit to the capital, and it is rarer for people to make trips to the rest of the country.

There is a huge tourist offering in regional areas of the UK, and I believe that we should help support those areas to unlock their full potential. Earlier this year, VisitBritain ran a tourism campaign entitled "Welcome to Another Side of Britain", which focused on encouraging visits to all parts of the UK, particularly those outside London, in order to spread the economic benefits. The campaign delivered a boost to the UK economy of over £190 million, and created more than 3,500 jobs. The marketing campaigns have been better able to disperse visitors into regions outside London, and I would like to see that continue. As part of the Cabinet Office's GREAT campaign, VisitBritain will market internationally, with its "See Things Differently" strategy focused on the USA and Europe, as they have the highest propensity to visit and spend.

As my hon. Friend will know, tourism in Devon and Cornwall can be very seasonal, with a huge influx of visitors in the summer months. In 2019, 14% of the annual spend in overnight trips was in August alone, with just 5% of spending occurring in January. I know that the fluctuation in visitor numbers can have a huge impact on the ability of businesses to retain staff year-round. I also understand that it is a particular challenge this year, given that Christmas bookings have been slow and there is still some uncertainty about the future for some businesses. None the less, I believe that the changes that we, with the co-ordination of VisitBritain, will make to the structure of DMOs as they become local visitor economy partnerships will really help to boost tourism in Devon and Cornwall.

I thank my hon. Friend again for securing this important debate, and I can assure him that the Government and I are absolutely committed to supporting all areas of the UK's tourism industry and to encouraging visitors to visit areas outside London that have an excellent tourism offer. This is our vision for the future and, by working with Members from all parties, that is what I hope we will be able to deliver. I look forward to continued engagement with the tourism sector over the coming months, and I promise that I will be a champion of its cause within the Government and will work with my hon. Friends.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fire Services: North-east England

4.30 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fire services in the North East.

I am very grateful to see this important debate so well attended; it could not be about a more deserving group of people. Like all our emergency services, our firefighters run towards danger while the rest of us run away. They have always kept doing their job, coming to our rescue and keeping our community safe. It is our job, as politicians, to ensure that they have the money and resources to do so.

Unfortunately, it has been hard to say that the Government have done that job properly for the last 12 years. I have been an MP for all those 12 years—for 17 years, actually—and I have spent a lot of time warning, throughout austerity and various debates, often in this very Chamber, about the impact that Government cuts would have on local fire services and their ability to maintain service levels and protect us.

In 2012, I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate about fire and rescue services. I warned that

“budget reductions will hit the poorest areas hardest... services will have to be cut. That, of course, is after preventive services have been cut to the bone.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2012; Vol. 549, c. 84WH.]

In 2018, I raised the issue again in another Westminster Hall debate, talking about how areas with high levels of deprivation, such as Washington and Sunderland West, had a higher risk of fire-related deaths, and needed a fair funding settlement. At the time, I spoke to Chris Lowther, our chief fire officer at Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service. I told Westminster Hall in that debate that

“He is doing everything within his power to manage the resources currently available, in a way that guarantees the safety of my constituents, and everyone across Tyne and Wear.”—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 132WH.]

Like many chief fire officers across the country, he did an impossible job, cutting back on everything he could in order to keep the service running safely. But he warned that if there were further cuts it would be difficult to say, hand on heart, that Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service would be able to provide a safe service.

I raised the issue successively at Prime Minister's questions in the following two weeks, when the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was Prime Minister. I raised just how concerned our local fire and rescue services were about their very stretched funding.

That brings us to today. Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service has continued to make its service more efficient, but there is very little left to cut back on. If the current trajectory continues, it has nothing left to cut. I have already said that services have been cut to the bone. Having spoken this week to the chief fire officer, Chris Lowther, and the chair of the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority, Councillor Phil Tye, I know how tough the situation is.

In 2010, before austerity, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service employed 880 full-time fire fighters, and over 1,000 full-time staff. In 2022, that has dropped to just 624 full-time firefighters, and just 860 staff employed

full-time in total. Given the recruitment freeze between 2014 and 2019, as well as an ageing workforce coming to retirement, staff numbers are likely to fall again. In 2010, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service had £59.4 million to spend. To keep up with inflation, that should have risen to £84 million by 2022. But what has happened? Its budget has been cut down to just £54.8 million; that is much less than it was in cash terms in 2010, and a massive and unsustainable real-terms cut. It leaves us, frankly, unprepared for the next crisis we may face.

We can all appreciate that the fire service was put under a huge amount of pressure this summer, with the unprecedented heatwave leading to an increased number of fires across the country—we all saw them on our TV screens, if not more up close. They devastated lives and livelihoods alike.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I want to commend the firefighters working at Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, who have attended two major fires in my constituency: one at Shee Recycling in Birtley, where there are environmental hazards, and a second at the Ryrton Willows—one of those summer fires that my hon. Friend referred to. We have also seen the impact of those budget reductions, with the loss of one pump at Swalwell in my constituency.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. A reminder that interventions must be brief.

Liz Twist: Thank you. There were also the proposed cuts to night cover in Birtley, which fortunately we were able to amend.

Mrs Hodgson: Coming back to the summer fires, that period included the busiest day for firefighters since world war two. That brings home the important role and work that firefighters do. How do the Government expect them to cope with future heatwaves without addressing the serious concerns this crisis raised about how stretched the workforce is?

In less foreseeable moments of crisis, fire services are the first responders there to protect the public. Following the 2017 Manchester Arena terrorist attacks, we were told that some fire and rescue services would be “unprepared” to respond effectively if a tragic event like that happened again. If such an event happened at one of the big arenas in our region—heaven forbid—how could we be assured that lives would be protected given this funding crisis?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I apologise for being a couple of minutes late for her speech. Teesside is served by the Cleveland Fire Brigade. Teesside is one of Europe's biggest fire risks, yet the formula that determines its income does not take any of that into consideration. Does she agree that risk should be examined as an important factor in determining funding?

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I will come on to. My chief fire officer told me that Cleveland is the worst in the country in terms of the fairness of that funding formula.

[Mrs Hodgson]

On a community level, these cuts will have consequences. Last Friday, I visited Barmston Village Primary School in my constituency. With no prompting from me whatsoever, two young boys told me separate stories of their family cars being damaged in an arson attack and one young girl told me about a time when she had to knock on a neighbour's door to tell them that something was burning on their property. What is more, all the children were upset about the damage caused to the play equipment in the local park by the big kids—they mean teenagers—setting fire to it.

In previous years, fire services have come out to schools and done talks with the children, especially the older children—the big kids—in the secondary schools, explaining the danger of arson and what to do if they see a fire. However, with preventative measures being cut first, it is becoming even more difficult for fire and rescue services to provide that important community outreach. That will also have consequences.

The Government promised to level up areas like Sunderland, but I fail to see how those promises can continue to be made when basic public services are being starved of cash and millions of working people are facing the fastest fall in their pay in years. That is why the chief fire officer and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service have called for the fire funding formula to be revised, so it once again takes into account deprivation as a risk factor, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned is so problematic in Cleveland. That was the case under the last Labour Government and it was changed after 2010 by the current Government.

The change would help local authorities like mine and all of ours that cannot raise huge amounts of funding through council tax to keep our services running. I do not want to go into all the reasons why, but that is a well-known fact. What is becoming ever more clear is that service bosses and frontline workers are on the same page: the service must protect the public, but it equally needs to protect its own staff.

The lack of funding has led to the Fire Brigades Union rejecting an unfunded 5% pay rise put forward by national employers. To be clear, that 5% is unfunded, meaning that fire and rescue services have to find an extra 5% from their existing budget to pay for it—I have already said how stretched their budgets currently are. It puts our chief fire officers across the north-east and across the country, who just want the very best for firefighters, in an incredibly difficult position. They do extremely important work. They just want the funds to properly reward their staff with fair pay for the very important work they do.

If industrial action does take place, there has been talk of the Home Office drafting in soldiers to replace striking staff and then asking these strapped-for-cash fire services to pay £4,000 per week per soldier to train and employ them. No one wants to see a strike. It is now up to the Government to get around the table with the FBU and resolve this dispute. The Government must now make sincere efforts to ensure that fire and rescue staff can continue to provide safe services, which means ensuring that fire services get the support they need and doing everything they can to ensure that fire services get a decent deal. It is clear for all to see how the Government

have shamefully cut fire services for more than a decade and how the cuts now risk the safety of our communities in the north-east.

I hope that if I ever attend another Westminster Hall debate on fire services in the north-east, it is under a Labour Government and we are able to properly address some of these issues. How would we do that? We will have grown the economy, provided high-quality public services and ensured that workers have better pay and conditions. That day cannot come soon enough for our communities in the north-east.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Colleagues, you can see how many of you there are wishing to get in. You will have about three minutes each. I call Peter Gibson.

4.42 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and to be called to speak in the debate. Having grown up in a fire service family in the north-east, this is a subject close to my heart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing the debate. Having met with my local fire service—the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service—just last week, it is very timely. I appreciate the opportunity to speak.

The County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is a vital emergency service and I am hugely proud of the fantastic work all its staff do every day of the week. Indeed, the service is recognised nationally as being extremely high performing, productive and efficient. I want to take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to the staff and praise them for their work and dedication. However, I understand that the service has serious concerns regarding the ongoing funding challenges it is facing, which may mean that there is a danger that it cannot sustain its current level of service into the future.

The authority now receives two thirds of its funding from local taxpayers. This reliance on council tax to fund fire and rescue services represents a significant challenge for the authority when it is faced with cost pressures and the council tax referendum limit remains as low as it has been. The impact is magnified in areas such as County Durham and Darlington, where almost 80% of the properties are in council tax bands A and B, meaning that a 1% increase in council tax would raise only an additional £190,000 for the authority, while in other areas 1% would raise significantly more. The reality is that the additional income that could be raised via council tax does not cover the cost increases incurred by the authority through unfunded pay awards, inflation and energy prices. Moreover, no one wants to see an increased council tax burden on our local communities. As such, the current funding mechanism appears to be unsustainable. Can the Minister outline what more the Government can do? I know the service is asking for precept flexibility.

More generally, I welcome that in May '22 the then Home Secretary unveiled the most comprehensive plans for fire reform in decades in the fire reform White Paper. The proposals put forward centre on people, professionalism and governance and aim to strengthen

the emergency services and ensure that people feel safer in their homes. I know that County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has responded to them. I know that these reforms seek to introduce changes to allow fire professionals to further develop their skills and I think it is important that we also talk about that in this debate.

4.45 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. I, like her, pay tribute to all members of the fire and rescue service, particularly those in County Durham and Darlington. I also pay tribute to Stuart Errington, the chief fire officer at County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, who is retiring in January after 30 years of service.

I have just listened to the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) talking as though this has just happened: no, it has happened because the Government have cut back central Government grants. As he has just said, in Durham, the fire and rescue service relies on council tax services for two thirds of its funding. It is a high-performing, efficient and extremely productive service. That is not me saying that—it is His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. They have had changes in working practices and there is nothing more that can be done to cut the fat out of the system. By pushing this on to the taxpayer, County Durham cannot fill the gap. For one thing, that is unfair but, secondly, due to the large numbers of band A properties, a 1% increase in council tax in County Durham will not raise anything like it would in, for example, Surrey.

The Government talk about levelling up but what we actually have here is distribution southward rather than to the deprived areas such as the north-east. Unless that funding formula is actually tackled in terms of more central Government grant or changing the formula, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service will fall over; it will go bankrupt. I know there is a call to increase council tax by 5% from the current 2% cap, but that is not fair and it will not solve the problem. That is pushing the issue on to the local council tax payers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, the situation has been going on since 2010. It has been done by stealth not just in that service, but in local government, where council tax payers in areas such as mine in County Durham are having to raise more through local council tax. With those low bandings, they have a limited ability to do that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, we rely on the men and women in the fire and rescue service to do remarkable things on our behalf in times of crisis.

The system is broken. My final point is this: if it is not fixed this year or certainly next year, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service will fall over. It will no longer be able to provide the service that keeps us all safe.

4.48 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I obviously congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and

Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing the debate. As the son of a former County Durham senior fire officer, Bob Howell, I am incredibly privileged to take part in the debate. I begin by acknowledging and thanking the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, which I will refer to as CDDFRS from hereon in, for the hard work that they do to protect us all.

Before coming to this place, I sat as a local councillor on the combined fire authority, so I fully understand the position. The chair of the CFA, John Shuttleworth, and the chief fire officer, Stuart Errington, have expressed to me and other colleagues that inflation and staff demands are taking a toll on the fire service's budget. Although they are solvent this year, even their best-case scenario for next year would see the budget fall into deficit.

In the decade to 2021, the number of incidents that fire and rescue services in England attended fell by 8%, but in my local area a heavy demand continues to be placed on the CDDFRS because, as my inbox sadly shows, arson in particular is a recurring problem. Indeed, in the north-east of my constituency of Sedgefield, in places like Wingate and Station Town, arson is the weapon of choice for a significant part of the criminal fraternity. It is predominately vehicle arson, which puts a disproportionate amount of pressure on the CDDFRS.

The funding model, as has been said, simply does not work. Due to the number of properties in council tax bands A and B, funding raised through council tax is too limited. Coupled with the level of deprivation, which means that many residents pay little or no council tax, fire services in parts of the country like mine cannot rely on making up what inflation has taken away. As a result, the leaders of CDDFRS are seeking changes to balance the budget while maintaining a high level of service and properly recompensing their staff.

I would like the Government to give further consideration to options to resolve that conundrum. The opportunity to move to 3% is a step in the right direction, but at an impact of £1 per percentage point, broadly speaking, the increase would need to be about £5 to bring the budget to balance. That is a relatively small amount, but it is outside the current threshold.

Changing the approach to capital expenditure may be a way to alleviate part of the cost pressure without dramatic funding changes. There is no longer a capital budget, so capital expenditure must be financed through loans or the use of reserves. Clearly, with rising interest rates, loan financing costs become an ever bigger drain. The alternative of utilising reserves is not open to CDDFRS, as it rightly maintains its reserves at a lower level, although I am aware that, across the UK as a whole, fire services do have significant reserves. I therefore encourage the Minister to consider an approach whereby capital expenditure is granted to those across the country with very low reserves.

I will finish by placing on record my admiration and support for Stuart Errington, the current chief fire officer of CDDFRS, who will retire at the end of the year. He has run the fire service with the motto "being the best". I believe that he has achieved that objective. I put on record my appreciation to him and all his exceptional staff for all the work they have done.

4.51 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on her determination in securing this important and timely debate. I declare an interest as a member of the FBU parliamentary group and a proud supporter of our firefighters and their trade union. I place on record my thanks—indeed, those of all of our members—for the excellent work that our firefighters do.

The funding crisis in fire and rescue highlights a basic contradiction in the Government's rhetoric. Whether we are talking about a northern powerhouse or levelling up, the reality is that we face higher taxes and cuts to services. I saw an interesting statistic from the Office for National Statistics that highlighted that contradiction. It showed that between 2006 and 2020, average wealth fell 17% in the north-east while increasing in every other region, bar the east midlands. London and the south-east led the way, with their wealth increasing 63% and 43% respectively.

As we have heard, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has lost around £10 million in Government funding over the past 12 years when we take inflation into account. Our fire and rescue authorities experienced a shift over the past decade so that two thirds of their overall funding now comes from local taxpayers.

I have a solution for the Minister, if she cares to act on it. The problem is that our choice is not between raising council tax and cutting services; due to the nature of the grant and the low council tax base, we are likely to have increased taxes and cuts to services. Clearly, that is unfair and unsustainable. Council tax is an unfair, regressive and broken system that places the heaviest burden on communities with the highest demand for services and the lowest ability to pay. We need to scrap that unfair tax and deliver a fairer system that is based on wealth, the ability to pay, and delivering public services based on need. My message for the Minister is to match the rhetoric with action, whether on the northern powerhouse, levelling up, or one nation, compassionate Conservatism.

The first step to resolving the funding challenge is to replace council tax with a proportional property tax that would balance an area's ability to pay and deliver services based on need. Can the Minister explain how we will secure additional funding for County Durham and Darlington if not through a proportional property tax, given that it cannot be raised through our low council tax base?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Colleagues, because you have all been so disciplined, I will allow the remaining speakers—with apologies to those who have already spoken—to have three and a half minutes.

4.54 pm

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on bringing forward this important debate.

Hartlepool is in the Cleveland Fire Authority area, which has already been mentioned. I met recently with representatives of the CFA, including chief fire officer Ian Hayton, to discuss some of the challenges that are unique to our area. I will illustrate some of those to give the Minister some context. We have a high hazard area, as we have already heard. We have an industrial cluster spanning two sides of a large river, with few crossings. We have 15 power stations, one of which is nuclear. We also have a large number of urban conurbations spread over a wide geographical area—again, split by the large river—including areas of severe deprivation.

That deprivation causes issues with arson, as we have already heard. In Cleveland, we have 10 times the national average of deliberate property fires. They are used as a weapon by drug dealers, money lenders and so forth. That creates a huge strain on our resources in Cleveland. Despite all that, my firefighters have a fabulous record, and I have admiration for them all. They still consistently manage the seven-minute response time for house fires, despite the number of full-time firefighters having fallen by 33%. However, as we have already heard, they are severely hampered by disproportionate funding compared with other fire and rescue authorities. It is unclear how long that will be sustainable with inflationary pressures.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the hon. Member and my next-door neighbour for giving way. She will have had the same letter as me from Ian Hayton and the chair of the Cleveland Fire Authority, which tells us that there were 494 full-time firefighters in 2010. There are now 330—a cut of 33%. The chief fire officer and the chair are saying that they cannot keep people safe if they do not get more money through a different formula. Does the hon. Member agree that the Minister needs to make change?

Jill Mortimer: Yes, I believe that change must be made, but after my discussions with Ian and his team—I have met them on a couple of occasions now—I do not believe it is all doom and gloom. They do have solutions. This is not just about cuts and funding. We have to accept that money is tight and scarce in this country. We have just gone through a global pandemic and we are fighting a war. It is all our money; there is only so much of it, and it has to be shared appropriately.

The people who know most about this are those in the fire service themselves. They are the people I spoke with. I am not going to stand here and say that I am an expert on how to fund a fire service; they know where to make positive changes, and where to find answers and solutions to the problems. Will the Minister meet me, along with colleagues from the Cleveland Fire Authority area and representatives of the authority, so that she can have the conversations that I have had with them and discuss their ideas, and we can plan positive ways to secure a safe way forward not just for the people of Hartlepool, but for everyone in the Cleveland Fire Authority area?

4.58 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for bringing forward this important debate. I declare an interest as a member of the FBU

parliamentary group. I want to place on record my sincere thanks, and those of my constituents in Wansbeck and the people of Northumberland, to the fantastic men and women of the fire and rescue service. They do an absolutely brilliant job. We need to recognise that, and I will focus most of my limited contribution on the pay increase.

Morale in the fire and rescue service is undoubtedly at an all-time low. There have been cuts of up to 30% since 2010, stations have closed, there are more fire engines off the streets, and 11,500 frontline firefighters have been sacked. In real terms, wages are around £4,000 lower than they were more than a decade ago. Is it any wonder that morale is as poor as it is?

When we look at what the fire and rescue service has done in Northumberland, we see that it was fantastic during covid and brilliant during Storm Arwen not so many months ago. It assisted in setting up the vaccine centres and getting personal protective equipment out to the relevant places. That is what the fire and rescue service does as well as putting out huge fires and saving lives. The service has been fantastic in getting humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and it has been really active in saving lives in rural Northumberland, with the wildfires and of course the floods. I remember the floods in Morpeth in 2008, when the fire and rescue service was unbelievable, I have to say.

Offering the fire and rescue service 5% is absolutely insulting—it really is. Inflation is 11.1% and here we are offering these key workers, who we clapped incessantly on a Thursday night, 5%. It is absolutely insulting. It is intolerable. It is not right. We have to remunerate fire and rescue service workers correctly to save our lives, our families' lives, and the lives of other people in our community, including schoolkids. We have to treat these people with the respect they deserve.

I worry that the dead hand of government is coming across the pay talks with public sector workers—the posties, the rail workers, the teachers—and I worry that the firefighters are going to be brought into some sort of big culture war that is being brewed up, and that they will not be recognised for the great work they do on behalf of our communities.

What a brilliant job the firefighters do. They do a fantastic job. I fully support every single man and woman involved in the fire and rescue service, and I think that we, as UK parliamentarians, need to get behind them and pay them right.

5.2 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate.

First, I pay tribute and offer my thanks to the brave firefighters across Cleveland who do so much to keep my community safe. Recently, I had the chance to get out on shift with officers from Cleveland Fire Brigade and spend time with the teams at Thornaby and Hartlepool. I got to see at first hand the determination and commitment of those brave officers, who put their lives on the line in the service of my community, facing the challenges of road traffic collisions on our busy road network, adopting a specialist approach to dealing with accidents in the River Tees, taking on the unique challenges of my area's

industrial heritage and its chemical sector, tackling grass fires and floods, and saving the lives of those whose homes or places of work are hit by fire. My local force and officers remain undeterred by their huge task, using every spare minute they have to support fire prevention and community safety, visiting the homes of vulnerable people to provide life-saving checks and safety advice, and supporting the vulnerable and elderly by providing equipment to keep them warm in the winter months.

Cleveland Fire Brigade faces unique financial challenges and pressures. The brigade serves an area with pockets of severe deprivation. Across the Cleveland Fire Brigade area there is an exceptionally low council tax base, with 46% of properties in band A compared with the national average of 24%, meaning that the authority raises from council tax the lowest proportion of core spending when compared with the UK's other fire and rescue authorities. That makes it incredibly difficult for the force to increase revenue in the way that many other brigades might.

I am saddened to say that Cleveland is the arson capital of Europe. A minority of mindless individuals put the lives of residents and our brave firefighters at risk. Moreover, the heavy industry in my part of the world adds to the pressures on service delivery. The risks and hazard profile of Cleveland simply are not recognised in the funding formula. We are not getting our fair share.

Cleveland has one of the smallest fire brigades in the UK, making it difficult to realise economies of scale. In recent years, the brigade has been innovative in its approach, becoming leaner and more efficient, but its current financial outlook is incredibly challenging. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer), I would be grateful if the Minister would agree to meet me, parliamentary colleagues from across Cleveland, and the brigade leadership to look at how we can ensure that Cleveland Fire Brigade continues to provide a sustainable, safe service, keeping the residents of Stockton South safe and giving our brave firefighters the resources that they need and deserve.

5.5 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate, the timing of which could not be more pertinent.

In recent years, we have seen the fire service step up when our communities have needed it, first working through the challenges of the pandemic, and then tackling wildfires in places such as Brandon in my constituency during this summer's heatwave. Almost a year ago today, Storm Arwen ravaged the north-east, leaving a trail of damage in its wake, with many of my constituents in harm's way. The Government were slow to help after the storm but, as always, the fire service was there when we needed it.

Of course, that is just one example. Every day, across our region, firefighters protect us by running towards danger while we run from it—but we cannot run away from the fact that those working in our fire service are not immune to the cost of living crisis. Their bills, mortgages and rents have spiralled while, like many

[*Mary Kelly Foy*]

public sector employees, their pay packet has lagged behind. According to FBU analysis, since 2009, real-terms wage cuts have wiped £4,000 a year from an average firefighter's salary.

In my constituency, the fire service is already under significant financial pressure; even its best-case projections involve more restructuring of an already stretched service. An unfunded 5% pay rise will push it into a budget deficit. The solution that the fire service in Durham would like to see is simple: a fair pay increase for its dedicated firefighters, funded by central Government. This is another fact that the Government cannot run away from: under their watch, the fire service has had its central funding slashed by 30%. That means that nationally, we have 11,500 fewer firefighters than we had in 2010, reducing resilience, slowing response times and jeopardising the safety of firefighters and the public.

Moreover, in the north-east as a whole since 2010, one in four firefighters has been cut, 600 whole-time firefighter posts have been slashed, and a quarter of fire control posts have gone. This is just another example of public services being run into the ground by the Government while working people see their pay, conditions and living standards eroded. To witness our brave firefighters and control staff having to resort to using food banks is nothing short of a national disgrace.

Climate change means that we will need firefighters more than ever, as wildfires and floods become more frequent. The damage done by extreme weather conditions such as Storm Arwen is no longer a once-in-a-generation event; we will increasingly have to live with it. I echo the FBU's call for a statutory duty for flooding in England, as there is in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is clear that we need a well-funded service. Let us not forget that it was the firefighters that dealt with some of the most harrowing scenes during the pandemic. It is only right that those who gave so much during that time are appropriately rewarded.

5.8 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate. She made a powerful speech, and she is an incredible champion for her area. We were all struck by her story of the children in Barmston Village Primary School, who all had stories to tell about arson. I was in nearby Horden last year, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), where I met the veteran Sean Ivey, whose house was burned down by kids in the area. I heard about the antisocial behaviour and the epidemic of arson in the area; we must not underestimate the impact that those fires have on local communities.

It is interesting that Members from across the House have said the same things today: we need fairer funding and more funding; we understand the inequalities in how the system is set up—the precept council tax in particular; we need more capital expenditure; and there has been a fall in real terms in the salaries of our firefighters. Throughout the debate we have heard about the cuts over the past 12 years. Although the number of

fires has been decreasing over the past few decades, we face significant new dangers. The number of fire service call-outs has increased every year since 2007; the number of fires increased by 3% last year; and global warming is leading to increased wildfires, which hon. Members have referred to—we saw a 200% increase this summer.

Alex Cunningham: I take no satisfaction in agreeing with my other neighbour, the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), who said that Cleveland is the arsonist capital of the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need not only a fair funding formula for the fire service, but all the police officers we have lost since 2010 to be rehired?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point, as always. Labour will put lots more neighbourhood policing back on to our streets to prevent the kind of antisocial behaviour that leads to arson in his area.

As we face a cold winter, when people will be forced to choose between heating and eating thanks to the Government's mini-Budget and the huge rises in costs and inflation, we have already heard about people using increasingly desperate means to keep warm. Staffordshire's fire chief warned of people relying on electrical heaters to dry clothes, burning unsafe materials to keep warm or staying too close to open fires.

To add to all those problems, the lessons of Grenfell have not been learned. Shamefully, the Government have implemented only a handful of recommendations from phase 1 of the inquiry: fire regulations are still unclear, sprinklers are still not mandatory, single stairwells are still allowed in blocks of flats, and there is no duty on anyone to develop personal evacuation plans for disabled people—an absolutely shameful reversal of a Government promise. On top of the Grenfell failings, as we move towards the more sustainable building of homes, we are increasingly using timber frames, which risk even more fires, because they are more combustible. Funding our fire service is literally a matter of life and death, not least because of the Government's woeful record on the economy and post Grenfell.

What an indictment it is that the policies of the past 12 years mean that our firefighters now have lower pay in real terms and that more than 11,000 firefighters have been lost. We have seen a pensions fiasco for firefighters and the police. Fire inspectors have seen some of the largest cuts in numbers—their numbers have fallen by almost one third since 2010, making the job of firefighters even harder. I have heard reports of firefighters using food banks. That is completely unacceptable.

At the height of the pandemic, the Conservative-controlled East Sussex Fire Authority tried to push through sweeping cuts. I was pleased to play a small part in those cuts being dropped. Cornwall's fire service told me that the Government's mismanagement of the new contract for our 999 and radio services—called the emergency services network—has put one of its vital centres at risk of closure, while leaving it with an outdated radio system that often breaks down. Will the Minister tell us what on earth she is doing to tackle that extraordinary waste of public money, which is costing each of our fire services literally millions of pounds? It is a shocking example of incompetence in the Home Office.

The Budget showed that, yet again, the Conservatives have loaded the costs on to working people. Our growth will still be the lowest in the G7 and the OECD over the next two years. As pay stagnates and inflation rises, more and more trade unions are balloting about their pay deals. The backdrop to many of the disputes is clear: working people are being hit by the fastest fall in real wages on record, and hammered by the Government's abject failure to tackle the cost of living emergency.

Strike action is always a last resort, because working people do not want to lose pay, especially in the middle of a cost of living crisis, but they simply feel that they have no choice. I find it extraordinary that the Home Office has written to fire and rescue services to say that they need to pay £4,000 per soldier per week for soldiers to be on stand-by if there is a strike and that local fire services across the country will have to suffer all the costs. Fire services do not want this. One told me that it would go down like "a bucket of sick" with firefighters. I have heard anecdotally that the Army is not keen on it either, because last time this happened, a lot of soldiers were lost to the fire sector, with people joining the fire service. What is the Minister doing and how is she engaging?

Peter Gibson: It is interesting that the hon. Lady refers to the intervention of the Army in previous strikes. I have just been doing some research into when the last fire brigade strikes were. They were in 2002, when Labour was in power, and 1997, when Labour was in power, but all the speeches from the Opposition side of the Chamber this evening seem to suggest that year dot was 2010. It clearly was not.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Let us remind ourselves that we are talking about the north-east.

Sarah Jones: I do not think anyone thinks 2010 was year dot, but the Government have been in power for 12 years, and we are judging that record today.

Mr Kevan Jones: It was year dot in 2010, because the Government took the deliberate decision to cut central Government funding to fire services and to push responsibility for that funding on to local taxpayers. That affected local council tax and fire services.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. They tried to push that funding to make themselves look better, so they could pretend the cuts were smaller than they actually were. We all know what is going on.

What is the Minister doing? How are the Government engaging with the FBU and the fire authorities to help us come to an agreement and avoid a strike? I urge her to clarify the Government's position, because it looks like Ministers are upping the ante when they should be solving the dispute. Ministers must work to address how we avoid strikes, instead of letting us drift towards them through inaction.

We have heard about the impact of the cuts in Tyne and Wear. In the north-east, one in four firefighters has been cut since 2010. I met fire chief Stuart Errington in Durham, and I want to add my praise for him as he approaches retirement. I also want to put on record my appreciation for Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service and for the amazing job Chris Lowther—the chief fire

officer—and his team are doing to keep people safe. In 2018, the Government said they were reviewing the funding formula for fire services. In 2020, they said that that review had been suspended due to the pandemic. Can the Minister tell the House whether the fire funding formula will indeed be reviewed?

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. The topics covered in this debate are of great importance to every one of us and to the public. I thank those who have taken part. It has been an extraordinary year for fire and rescue services, responding to wildfires and major events such as the Commonwealth games, providing vital kit to Ukraine and working with the Government to drive forward fire reform.

I held the brief of Fire Minister briefly over the summer, and it was a pleasure to meet the Interior Minister of Ukraine and some of the firefighters who, with firefighters from across Europe, were helping to deliver much-needed equipment to Ukraine. It was very humbling. That work has been a joint effort on the part, not least, of local fire and rescue services and national Government.

Sarah Jones: I add my praise for the work that has gone on to send fire services and support to Ukraine. However, does the Minister know that some areas wanted to send equipment to Ukraine, but it turned out to be too old? Some equipment is so old that it was not deemed adequate to send to Ukraine.

Miss Dines: I had several meetings about that. The fact of the matter was that we were sending much-needed surplus. I know from my experience—one would need to write to the present Fire Minister about this, as I am assisting him today—that there were many circumstances where even old equipment was streets ahead of what the Ukrainians had. They were extremely grateful, and the firefighters I met were tearful to have our old equipment, so I do not think we need to be so critical. We assisted them greatly and saved many lives. I spoke to people who spent weeks taking that equipment over. It was gratefully received. It was never rejected as being outdated, as far as I am aware.

I want to pay tribute to the firefighters at home who dealt with wildfires. As Fire Minister, I was able to visit scenes that required fire services—even one just outside my constituency, in the constituency of High Peak. In addition, fire and rescue services helped to ensure our public safety while the nation paid its respects to Her Majesty the late Queen Elizabeth II. Those efforts should be celebrated, but we still have further to go.

Along with Grenfell and the Manchester arena inquiries, the inspectorate's state of fire and rescue reports fired the starting gun for reform. There is a clear and growing case for change. Fires and the reaction to them and other threats are growing and changing. Fire and rescue services, like all other sections of the public sector, need to respond to that. They are usually up for a challenge, and I have every confidence that they will perform well.

In May, the Government published a fire reform White Paper that consulted on our vision for reform, and we aim to publish the response to the consultation in due course. The public are rightly proud of our fire

[*Miss Dines*]

and rescue services, and right hon. and hon. Members have spoken eloquently of their experiences of hearing from professionals and constituents in this regard.

It is important that the services are encouraged to put the public first in everything they do. The Government have their part to play in ensuring that we support our fire and rescue services and that they are making the most of the tools and knowledge available to them. The White Paper has set out proposals that achieve that. Firefighters and fire staff do great work and deserve the gratitude and support of us all—I know that everyone present will agree on that.

Let me turn to some of the specific points made in the debate, starting with protection and prevention, to which the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) referred. The Government recognised that additional capacity was required and have provided an additional £50 million. Since 2019-20, that money has been funded to assist increases in capacity and capability in protection teams, which has delivered an increase in the number of staff.

Alex Cunningham: In Cleveland, the fire and rescue service faces inflationary pressure of £145 million, and there is no chance at all of finding further cuts. Either we put the public and industry at risk or the fire authority goes bust. Which would the Minister prefer?

Miss Dines: There are many concerns in this regard. However, I have the utmost faith that local fire and rescue services will be able to work in a way that does not put the public at risk, so I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's argument.

The Government have delivered an increase in the number of staff working in protection, and an increase in the skills and qualifications of those already there.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Dines: There is not a great deal of time left, so I will make some progress.

I would like to talk about live pay issues, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). On concerns about the threat of industrial action by the FBU, I note that it has rejected the significantly increased 5% pay offer made by employers and will now ballot members for their views on industrial action. Under the current system, the Home Office plays no direct role in negotiation or funding of firefighter and control staff pay, which is the responsibility of the National Joint Council. In the White Paper, we set out our intentions to conduct an independent review of the current pay system under the National Joint Council, which has been widely criticised. Of course, firefighters deserve to have a decent pay system instead of the current arrangement, which has been widely criticised. I hope that industrial action can be avoided through continued employer and employee negotiations.

I want to talk about the funding formula, which has been mentioned by various right hon. and hon. Members. Changes to the fire formula are being looked at. As Members may be aware, fire is part of the local government settlement, and any updates would need to be co-ordinated across local government. However, as Members are

aware, the fire formula is mainly a population formula, and population will always be a significant driver in any new formula. The important thing is to provide the funding that fire and rescue services need. The local government settlement will be published next month, and it will set budgets for the year 2023-24.

Mrs Hodgson: I look forward to the publication of the new data, but will the Minister respond to the point about taking away the deprivation funding? I think all of us in this room were united in saying that that is a risk factor in a lot of the arson and fires that we see, and it really needs to be put back into the formula.

Miss Dines: I invite the hon. Lady to write to the Fire Minister to express in detail the particular characteristics of her area, which have also been mentioned by other speakers, to see what can be done in that regard.

In relation to capital funding, the Government are clear that fire and rescue services have the resources they need. Standalone fire and rescue authorities have received a 6.2% increase in core funding for the year 2022-23, compared with last year. What is important is that the quantum of funding is right, rather than having specific capital funding grants, which are less flexible for local authorities than funding from a standard local government grant or council tax.

A number of other issues were mentioned. Various hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), raised the issue of firefighter job cuts. Firefighters work very hard to protect our communities, but the nature of a firefighter's work is changing. Fire incidents have fallen 32% in a decade, although I appreciate that there are regional variations and local issues, and I welcome correspondence about those issues following today's debate. It is, however, the responsibility of fire and rescue services to ensure that they have the appropriate number of firefighters and control staff to deliver their core functions. The Home Office works closely with fire and rescue services to ensure they have the resources they need to do their work, and funding continues to increase. I want communities to receive the service they desire, which includes firefighters being fully supported to meet those communities' concerns.

Regarding general funding concerns, when the last Labour Government left office, public services and the public finances were in a parlous state. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It would have been irresponsible to continue spending at that rate, so it does not behove Members to moan and groan about the present situation. Where there are international and domestic crises, we need to work together to make the most of the money we have. I hope that Members will not fall into the trap of wanting to play party politics with people's lives.

I pay tribute to everybody who has contributed to today's debate. There are interesting regional variations that have to be considered, and where there are issues such as arson, fire, criminality and antisocial behaviour, I expect everyone to work together with their local police to assist in addressing them. That requires joint working, and greater training on how to deal with those social issues may need to take place. Just putting more money into something does not mean it will work—it needs careful thought, and we must all look after every penny and be careful in that regard.

I thank each and every hon. Member who has spoken for raising their individual issues, including flooding and other interesting issues in their constituencies—for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) talked about the dynamics in her constituency. I apologise to those I have not mentioned due to the time constraints, and I know that these issues mean a great deal to all of us in this Chamber.

In my last 30 seconds, I will repeat my thanks to all who have contributed today. This has been an insightful and interesting debate, but we must not allow it to be political. These discussions provide us with a useful reminder—not that we need one—of the extraordinary contribution that fire and rescue services make to our communities. It is in all our interests to ensure that fire and rescue services are adaptable, inclusive and efficient, and the Government will continue to work with them to deliver improvements and, where necessary, reforms.

5.28 pm

Mrs Hodgson: I thank all MPs from across the north-east who have attended today's important debate. I also thank the shadow Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones)—and the Minister, who is the one who made this debate political, rather than anyone else.

This afternoon, we have had almost complete agreement on the issues that all four of our fire services face, and we all agree that we need a much fairer fire funding formula—one that once again recognises levels of deprivation as a risk factor that leads, in particular, to more arson. I will take the Minister up on her suggestion and write to her with more details on that issue. We need formula reform so that we can fund this vital service properly but also pay our vital firefighters properly. The unfunded 5% pay offer is just not acceptable, and I put the Government on notice that we—particularly those of us in the Labour party, although I also look to Government Back Benchers—will not let this debate be the end of the matter. The Minister is new to her Department, so if she wants to make her mark, she can do so by getting this issue sorted out as soon as possible, and definitely before Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fire services in the North East.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 23 November 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UK Earth Observation

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): The Government are announcing today a package of up to £200 million funding to invest in the UK Earth observation sector, to protect the future of UK talent and industry in earth observation and mitigate the impact of ongoing delays to UK participation in the EU Copernicus programme, while the EU continues to block our association.

Earth observation (EO) is a vital science and a growing industry. This is the right time to invest in projects that benefit our planet and grow our economy: EO supports the UK to become a science superpower and prioritises our space and net zero ambitions—more than half of key climate data comes from space.

The UK has a vibrant landscape of world-leading EO academic and industrial organisations and a well-founded reputation for excellence in EO. For example, in climate science, leading UK research institutions have been measuring sea and land surface temperature from space for over three decades—Oxford University, RAL Space, Reading University and Leicester University. This data is used by meteorological agencies around the world to improve weather forecast accuracy, helping to save lives, infrastructure and crops.

In the “National space strategy”, His Majesty’s Government committed to remain at the forefront of earth observation technology and know-how. The investments announced today will deliver an essential funding boost to recognise the importance of this work/market and will benefit academia and industry and build our national capability. The funding is spread across 17 projects delivered through the following Government partner organisations:

- £137.6 million UK Space Agency (UKSA)
- £19.3 million Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)
- £14.7 million Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC)
- £11.7 million Met Office
- £4.2 million Innovate UK

These projects will deliver benefits across the UK and include a broad range of activities from measuring wind speeds to improving the accuracy of climate data, and from funding small and medium-sized enterprise projects to additional PhD places. Some projects will involve new or extended collaborations with international partners such as Australia.

Investing in the UK EO sector is a vital part of achieving our ambitions in space and with the range of applications of EO data, including net zero targets, but it is just the first step.

Over the last few months, my officials have begun discussions with the Earth observation community about the longer-term plans for the sector. The package announced today provides an interim response to what we have been hearing are their biggest challenges. We will continue to work with the sector to identify strategic priorities to keep building on the world-leading excellence in UK Earth observation.

These investments are UK-wide and will provide targeted support during this time of uncertainty. They aim to support the retention of talent and firms across the sector, and we have particularly focused on how to ensure that both academia and industry can benefit from these projects.

Context

The EU has now delayed our association for nearly two years. The UK has done everything it can to secure association, including entering into formal consultations to encourage the EU to implement its obligations.

The Government remain ready to discuss association with the EU, but with the EU continuing to refuse our request to formalise association, we cannot wait forever. Our priority is to invest in the UK’s EO sector and protect our knowledge and capabilities.

[HCWS380]

TREASURY

Bank of England Asset Purchase Facility

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stocks of UK Government bonds and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the APF—asset purchase facility—by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities. The Bank ceased reinvestment of assets in this portfolio in February 2022 and has since commenced sales of corporate bonds on 28 September 2022, and sales of gilts acquired for monetary policy purposes on 1 November 2022.

The then Chancellor agreed a joint approach with the Governor, in an exchange of letters on 3 February 2022, to reduce the maximum authorised size of the APF for asset purchases every six months, as the size of APF holdings reduces.

On 4 November the Governor and I agreed to reduce the maximum size of the APF from £966 billion to £886 billion, to reflect the unused portion of the recent financial stability-related APF expansion. Since 5 May 2022, the total stock of assets held by the APF for monetary policy purposes has fallen from £866.6 billion to £851.6 billion. In line with the approach agreed with the Governor, the authorised maximum total size of the APF has therefore been reduced to £871 billion.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and HM Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government’s broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, the APF and its directors from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS381]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Publication of the UK Joint Fisheries Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The UK joint fisheries statement (JFS) has been published today that sets the direction of fisheries management in the UK over the coming years.

The four fisheries Administrations have worked together to develop shared policies which as a package will deliver or contribute to delivering the eight objectives set out in the Fisheries Act 2020.

A copy of the JFS has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available on gov.uk.

[HCWS382]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Manchester Mental Health Trust: Edenfield Centre

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Yesterday, NHS England announced an independent review will be taking place regarding the unacceptable incidents that took place at the Greater Manchester Mental Health Trust this year. It will focus on how these incidents were able to happen and why the failings were not picked up.

The abhorrent treatment of vulnerable people at the Edenfield Centre shown in the Panorama episode was completely unacceptable. Every patient has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, in a caring and therapeutic environment where their rights are upheld, their needs are met, and they feel supported and listened to.

This is why I welcome the steps taken by colleagues in the NHS to investigate those events. As the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), stated in Parliament on 13 October 2022, this should not have happened. Therefore, it is vital that we get to the bottom of what went wrong so that we can make sure we do better in the future. As I said at the Dispatch Box, I have also instructed my officials to consider what is needed on wider issues for mental health inpatient care, separately to this independent review. I will give an update on this in due course.

[HCWS383]

Petition

Wednesday 23 November 2022

OBSERVATIONS

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Brewery Centre in Burton upon Trent

The petition of residents of the constituency of Burton,

Declares that the items, artefacts and archives of the National Brewery Centre in Burton upon Trent must not be lost after the building is closed down; and further that the heritage of Burton's brewing industry is of national cultural importance.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support Burton's heritage and help ensure that all the items, artefacts and archives from the National Brewery Centre in Burton upon Trent are kept within the town for public exhibition following the closure of the National Brewery Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Kate Kniveton, Official Report, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 979.]

[P002769]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):

This Government are deeply committed to supporting arts and culture, and in particular to the important and unique role a museum can have in bringing communities together. It is good to see that Molson Coors, the National Brewery Heritage Trust and East Staffordshire Borough Council have committed to finding a suitable new home for the National Brewery Centre collection.

Arts Council England (ACE) is the body through which the Government support the museums sector. ACE can accredit museums, and working towards accreditation would broaden the range of funding opportunities and support available to the museum once its future is secured. Further information can be found on ACE's website. Those caring for the collection may also wish to explore the ACE-funded Museum Development services for further advice on accreditation and funding, and the Association of Independent Museums and the Museums Association can also offer advice on seeking alternative premises and options for the collection.

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PETITION

Wednesday 23 November 2022

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National Brewery Centre in Burton upon Trent	1P

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**not later than
Wednesday 30 November 2022**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
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