

**Tuesday
14 March 2023**

**Volume 729
No. 133**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 14 March 2023

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 March 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Israel and Palestine

1. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the security and human rights situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [904049]

11. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [904059]

14. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Whether his Department is taking steps to support the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. [904062]

15. **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [904063]

24. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the security and human rights situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [904072]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The security situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains fragile. Last week I spoke with my Israeli and Palestinian counterparts, and urged both sides to take steps to de-escalate and avoid a cycle of violence. We welcome the United States' Middle East Partnership for Peace Act and the proposals for increased international funding for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Steven Bonnar: Let me begin by condemning the recent spike in violence and bloodshed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and on behalf of us all I pay respect to all Palestinian and Israeli victims of conflict. The Secretary of State's Department has acknowledged that there is a culture of impunity when it comes to crimes committed by Israeli settlers against Palestinians, and the SNP wholeheartedly agrees. What are the Government doing to encourage Israel to end

the widespread and systematic discrimination against Palestinian populations? Will he outline any of the concrete steps that have been taken to deter land seizures, home demolitions, and the forced evictions of Palestinian people and their communities?

James Cleverly: The UK enjoys a strong bilateral relationship with Israel, which allows us to raise issues where we disagree. We have disagreed with settlement expansion, which we have raised directly, and we also disagree with the demolition of Palestinian homes. Our position on that is long standing and consistent. In my most recent conversations with the Israeli Foreign Minister, I raised our concerns about the speculation of settlement building on the E1 territories in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I am pleased that there has now been a moratorium on such expansions, because to do so would be damaging to the prospects of a sustainable two-state solution.

Helen Hayes: In February I visited Masafer Yatta in the south Hebron hills, where the Israeli Government are planning to evict more than 1,000 Palestinians from their homes. That sits alongside Prime Minister Netanyahu's election pledge to annex west bank settlements, amounting to 30% of the territory, while Finance Minister Smotrich recently said that the village of Huwara should be "wiped out". Has the Foreign Secretary raised those matters with his Israeli counterpart, and how does he intend to ensure that the new Israeli Government abide by their obligations under international law?

James Cleverly: We raise issues of settlement expansion with the Government of Israel, and I have raised with my Israeli counterpart the need for a careful use of language. I have raised with both my Palestinian and Israeli counterparts the need for all of us to try to find ways of de-escalating the tensions. At this stage, that must rightly be the priority for us all, while we continue to work with the Israeli Government on ensuring that we keep a sustainable two-state solution alive.

Andrew Gwynne: Five years ago, the British Government became the first in the world to endorse a concept of an international fund for Israeli and Palestinian peace. Since then, warm words have followed, but very little action. Given the desperate need for that fund right now, with the deterioration of the situation in Israel and Palestine, will the UK Government commit again to leading on that fund? Will the Foreign Secretary use the opportunity of the G7 summit in May to get other international partners lined up as well?

James Cleverly: People-to-people links between Israelis and Palestinians are incredibly important, and we fund projects to build co-operation, whether at Government-to-Government level, or people to people. We remain in close contact with our US counterparts about the international fund for peace. We want to ensure that it is the most effective use of funding allocated towards people-to-people links, and we will always look favourably at projects to build greater peace and co-operation. We want to ensure that anything we subscribe to, or any funding we commit, is allocated to the most effective way of bringing about that reconciliation.

Andy McDonald: In the west bank town of Huwara, over 400 settlers, backed by Israeli soldiers, torched Palestinian homes, businesses and vehicles, and killed 37-year-old Sameh Aqtash, in what senior Israel Defense Forces commanders have called a pogrom. Israel's Finance Minister Smotrich, who describes himself as a fascist homophobe, openly said Huwara should be wiped out. Such extremism is given licence by a lack of international accountability, so will the Foreign Secretary, if he agrees with the rule of international law, commit to banning all goods sourced from Israeli settlements illegally built on occupied Palestinian land?

James Cleverly: As I have said in answer to other questions, we have made it clear that the language used with regard to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories needs to be de-escalatory. It needs to be carefully thought through. Inflammatory language, as we have seen, is unacceptable. The behaviour of those settlers is unacceptable. That has been recognised by the Israeli authorities and we want to make sure that those people are held to account for the actions they have taken. We will always seek to reinforce the viability of a future Palestinian state as part of a sustainable two-state solution. The decision with regard to settlement goods is long standing and we do not speculate about any changes to those positions.

Carol Monaghan: I welcomed the recent joint commitment by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to reduce the surge in violence, and the Israeli Government's pledge to halt new settlement constructions, but on the very day that commitment was signed, Prime Minister Netanyahu tweeted:

"Contrary to tweets, construction and regulation in Judea and Samaria"—
the west bank—

"will continue according to the original planning and construction schedule, without any changes. There is and will not be any freeze."

That is an indication of further violations of international law. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that whatever his diplomatic approach is at the moment, it simply is not working?

James Cleverly: The United Kingdom has a like-minded position alongside a number of our international friends and allies. We seek to protect the viability of a sustainable two-state solution. We raised with the Israeli Government our concerns about activities that might put that future at risk. That is not something the UK does alone; it is something we do in close co-ordination with a number of our international friends and allies. That will continue to be our diplomatic stance.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): Last Thursday, a Hamas terrorist shot three Israelis in the heart of Tel Aviv, just a few streets away from the British embassy. Shooting and bombing attacks have rocked Israel for over a year now and this wave appears to be intensifying. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those attacks? What meaningful steps can he take to counter the resurgence in terrorist activity?

James Cleverly: The UK Government condemn terrorism in all its forms. Whatever criticism Palestinians may have of the Israeli Government, there is no justification for terrorist action. We always encourage dialogue, we

always encourage co-operation and we always encourage actions that de-escalate. That will continue to be our posture with regard to Israel and the OPTs.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): The only way to permanently end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is to deliver Palestinian self-determination and preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic identity through a peaceful two-state solution. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that his Department remains committed to achieving that solution based on 1967 borders and the recognition of Palestine as a state?

James Cleverly: Our position on a sustainable two-state solution is long standing. We will always encourage Israel to take actions that support that and we have the same conversations with representatives of the Palestinian Authority. We encourage dialogue, we encourage negotiation, we encourage co-operation and we encourage de-escalation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The emergence of Lions' Den, a new terrorist group to go alongside Hamas, Hezbollah and many other Islamic terrorist groups, is clearly a threat to Israel's security, and indeed that of the Palestinians. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of Lions' Den and what co-operation is he pursuing with the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government to combat this new form of terrorism?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We will address terrorism in close co-operation with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, neither of whom have an incentive or desire to allow terrorism to flourish. We will continue our close co-operation with the security services in Israel to try to ensure that Palestinians, Israelis and Brits in the region are all kept safe.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I raised these issues, the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and chief negotiator simply stormed out of the meeting. Does there come a time when simply raising issues is not enough?

James Cleverly: It is better than not raising them, I would suggest.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As we have already heard, on 26 February, following the appalling murder of two Israelis, a violent mob of 400 settlers attacked the Palestinian town of Huwara, killing one, injuring hundreds, and burning buildings and cars. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said, a far-right Minister in the Israeli Government called for Huwara to be wiped out. That shocking incident is part of the deteriorating situation in the occupied west bank and the wider problem of settler violence, for which too often no one is held to account. Again, will the Government press the Israeli authorities to condemn and crack down on these shocking incidents of settler violence?

James Cleverly: There has been condemnation of those actions within the Israeli system. We are always clear that where there is lawbreaking, authorities should take action. Within the Israeli system there has been

recognition of the action being illegal and provocative, and therefore we will continue to work with the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to find ways of de-escalating the situation and striving for peace, and for what ultimately is in the best interests of Palestinians, Israelis and the region: a peaceful and sustainable two-state solution.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In February we welcomed the moratorium on new construction in settlement areas, as the Foreign Secretary has described. As we heard, that was followed by an immediate and blatant breach of trust by the Israeli Prime Minister. The Foreign Secretary says that it is better to raise issues than not, but how does he measure success in raising them, because we see absolutely no evidence of success?

James Cleverly: I do not think it is news to anyone in the House that the situation in Israel and the OPTs is complicated and long standing. We are not the only country in the world that raises these important issues, and we can continue to do so because we have a strong working relationship with both the Government of Israel and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority—as I said, I had conversations with both very recently. We will continue to work at what we think is in everyone's interests: a sustainable two-state solution. We will not be fatalistic about it. We will not give up just because it is difficult. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that we should walk away just because it is a long-standing challenge, that is up to him. We will not abandon the Israelis or the Palestinian people. We will continue working for a sustainable two-state solution.

Girls' Access to Education

2. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What progress his Department has made in helping to ensure that girls around the world have access to 12 years of quality education. [904050]

7. **Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that girls receive a quality education throughout the world. [904055]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Ensuring 12 years of quality education for all girls is a British Government priority. We run bilateral education programmes in 19 countries, and our girls' education challenge programme is supporting 1.6 million girls to secure a quality education.

Liz Twist: During its G7 presidency, the UK introduced two global targets for improving access to education for girls in low and middle-income countries by 2026. Can the Minister say what progress the Government are making in this area; when they expect the targets to be met; what co-ordinating role the UK is playing; and whether he will centre the voices of girls and young women, including those most impacted by inequality and discrimination, in the delivery of the targets?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right; those two specific targets were a major priority for the UK G7 presidency in 2021. Prioritising foundational learning—reading, writing and counting well—is at the heart of that. We are on track to achieve both targets by the date agreed at the G7.

Andrew Western: Since the fall of Kabul, some 850,000 girls have been prevented from attending school by the Taliban. Recently, pupils at St Matthew's C of E Primary School in Stretford undertook a whole-school march in solidarity with the plight of Afghan girls denied an education. They have done all they can to raise awareness of this important issue. What more does the Minister believe his Government can do to raise awareness of this ongoing travesty? Crucially, will he agree to bring forward a comprehensive Afghanistan strategy that takes into account the ongoing crackdown on the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan?

Mr Mitchell: I congratulate the school in the hon. Gentleman's constituency on that public-spirited statement about the rights of women and the appalling violations that are taking place in Afghanistan. The Taliban are not a monolith in Afghanistan; there are parts of the country in which education is taking place at both a primary and a secondary level for girls. It is the job of the international community to try to persuade and argue with the Taliban Administration that what is happening in those areas should be extended across the whole country.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): With 129 million girls out of school across the world, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the FCDO on putting girls' education at the heart of the women and girls strategy that was announced last week? The International Parliamentary Network for Education brings together parliamentarians from over 60 countries to promote the importance of education. Will my right hon. Friend encourage Members of this House to sign up to the network so that we can continue to work with others to ensure that no children are left behind? Mr Speaker, will you join?

Mr Mitchell: I am certain that if you sign up, Mr Speaker, most colleagues will follow your lead. My right hon. Friend has done a great job in this area herself. Between 2015 and 2020, the UK supported more than 8 million girls with getting into school, of whom 65% were living in fragile countries.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): One of the biggest barriers to education worldwide is poor health. In 2021, more than 600,000 people worldwide died of malaria. Will the Minister please commit to renewing the UK Government's commitment towards meeting the 2030 Commonwealth goal of ending malaria? Will he also provide maximum support to the Global Fund?

Mr Mitchell: As my hon. Friend knows, we committed to the latest Global Fund replenishment a sum of £1,000 million, so we are right behind the aspirations that he has expressed. A child dies every minute from malaria, entirely needlessly. Dealing with that is a top priority for the Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): By the middle of this century, Africa will be home to 1 billion children, yet in places such as northern Nigeria half of girls are out of school. Achieving universal girls' education would end child marriage, halve infant mortality and drastically reduce early childbearing. Can the Minister update the House on what progress has been made towards our G7 presidency pledge to get 40 million more girls into school? Can he explain how that squares with the Government's decision to cut the FCDO's education, gender and equality budget in half last year?

Mr Mitchell: We are looking at the budgets for the next financial year, and indeed the year after, and we will come to the House and set out what they are. However, the hon. Lady should be in no doubt that this is a top priority, as I explained to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). If we want to change the world, we can do so by educating girls. That is the first and foremost way of achieving it, and the Government are absolutely behind that agenda.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): We all strongly support the education of girls worldwide. That is something that we should all be working on, but the UK must avoid the danger of reinventing the wheel. The EU already has 100 co-operation agreements on education, of which the UK was a leading part until recently. With the thaw in EU-UK relations, for which I commend the Government for fixing the Northern Ireland protocol difficulties, surely there is an opportunity for the UK to fold itself back into these frameworks, not reinvent the wheel, and get more girls into education.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right: we take a wholly unideological approach to educating girls and women. We go with what is most effective—with what works—and if the EU produces programmes that are good value for taxpayers' money, we will of course look at them.

Hunger Crisis in East Africa

3. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with international partners on the hunger crisis in east Africa. [904051]

9. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the hunger crisis in east Africa. [904057]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): East Africa currently represents the world's largest and most severe humanitarian crisis. We have allocated £156 million in life-saving aid across the region this financial year.

Nick Smith: Oxfam estimates that one person is likely to die every 36 seconds in east Africa owing to food insecurity, but the "Integrated Review Refresh", published yesterday, failed to acknowledge this unfolding crisis. Drought and famine have displaced nearly 2 million

people in Ethiopia and Somalia recently. What further action can the Government take to support people on the ground and ensure that they can return home safely?

Mr Mitchell: I am sure that when the hon. Gentleman has time to study yesterday's "Integrated Review Refresh" in detail, he will see that it contains much to be welcomed in respect of the future of Britain's international development leadership. However, he is right to talk about the intense humanitarian needs that exist in the area that he has mentioned. In Ethiopia we are helping to deliver humanitarian support to 8 million people, alongside efforts to promote water conservation. In Sudan, £320,000 vulnerable people are receiving food support thanks to British assistance. In South Sudan, 200,000 are receiving emergency food and nutrition, and in Somalia—which I visited in December—4.4 million people have received water, sanitation and hygiene support from Britain since 2018, and 3.2 million have received emergency food. The hon. Gentleman can therefore rest assured that we are absolutely on the case, and are doing everything we can to support the international effort to counter what may well be the fifth year of drought.

Mike Kane: The £156 million of aid to which the Minister referred is five times less than the amount provided by the UK Government six years ago to deal with a milder crisis. In a week when we are talking about displaced people, we are facing an exodus of biblical proportions in east Africa. What more can the Government do to help those communities to stay in their homes?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right, in that the aims of British development policy are to help people to remain in their own homes and be safe and secure and, indeed, prosperous. What we are seeing in the horn of Africa is an immense crisis of extraordinary proportions to which the whole international community must respond, not only with money but with skill and expertise, and British leadership is at the forefront of that.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): There is much talk about the deaths on the battlefield in Ukraine, but what assessment has the Department made of the impact of grain prices caused by grain not going into east Africa from Ukraine? It is quite possible—and I should be interested in testing this assertion—that more people have died in east Africa as a result of the war in Ukraine than have died within the confines of that country.

Mr Mitchell: I cannot comment on the hon. Gentleman's last point, but he is right to suggest that, as a result of Putin's illegal brutality and invasion of Ukraine, there have been disruptions to food supplies in the Sahel in particular, but also in east Africa. Those disruptions are causing rising inflation and food shortages, and Putin stands condemned for the effect of his actions in that respect as well as every other.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting Kenya and meeting students who described to me graphically the impact that drought caused by climate change is

having on their lives and on their food supply. That is due to failed crops and boreholes that are drying up, but it is also having an impact on their education. What more does my right hon. Friend think can be done not just to address the current crisis, but to introduce mitigation measures in the longer term so that climate change does not have such a drastic impact on those communities?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We discuss resilience and climate adaptation frequently with the Kenyan Government. I was there in December. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was also there and he spoke to President Ruto. My hon. Friend may rest assured that our relationship with Kenya, which is extremely close, deals not only with humanitarian, trade and investment issues but with drought and the other issues she has raised.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Across east Africa, 48 million people are facing crisis levels of hunger, yet east Africa has been taken out of the integrated review. Even the Minister's own colleagues understand that the fundamental issues in east Africa are climate adaptation and real partnership. What are the Government going to do to address the fundamental causes of this cycle of crises?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is wrong about it being taken out of the IR, and if she has the chance this weekend to study it in detail, she will see that that is the case, but she is right to say that an estimated 72 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2023 due to conflict, drought and flooding. On all those issues, Britain is working with its allies across the international community to do everything we can to stop it, recognising that this is the fifth consecutive season of failed rains across the horn of Africa.

Sanctioned Russian Assets

4. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to seize and repurpose sanctioned Russian assets to assist the reconstruction of Ukraine. [904052]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The simple principle is that Russia should pay for the harm and damage that it has caused. We must ensure that any proposals are robust, safe and compliant with domestic and international law, and we will of course consider all lawful routes to ensure that Russia pays for the damage and harm it has caused.

Dame Diana Johnson: The UK Government have frozen Russian assets, but the EU has already set out a plan to shift such assets into a fund to help to rebuild Ukraine, and Canada has already passed a law to do the same. What is stopping us? Why can we not do the same?

James Cleverly: Both those projects are still in train; neither has come to a conclusion and no country has liquidated frozen assets. As I say, anything that we do needs to be in complete compliance with both domestic and international law.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Reconstruction of Ukraine will also require rehabilitating and helping women. In the wake of what we have done on preventing sexual violence in conflict, what steps will we now be able to take to help those who have been victims of sexual violence?

James Cleverly: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done in this area for many years. I am proud of the fact that the UK has been at the forefront of the campaigns for preventing sexual violence in conflict. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad organised a conference on this very issue last year. We must ensure that the perpetrators, the facilitators and those ordering this brutality are all held to account, and we will work with our international partners to ensure that that happens.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Ukraine's 2023 budget alone has a \$38 billion gap, and the cost of the damage done to critical infrastructure runs into the hundreds of billions. There is one party responsible: Russia. We support the Government's plans for a reconstruction conference this summer, but we cannot have any dragging of the heels in making Russia foot the bill for its barbarous war. We have heard about other international examples, so when will the Foreign Secretary set out a clear plan to seize—not just freeze—Russian state assets and repurpose them?

James Cleverly: The sad but simple truth is that it is not as easy as the hon. Gentleman's question implies. The fact is that there have been conflicts around the world before and there have been perpetrators before, but there has never been a seizure of assets. As I say, we need to ensure that we are compliant with both domestic and international law. We will look carefully at the proposals being explored and tested by our close friends and allies, but I can reassure him and the House that we will ensure, working in close co-operation with our friends internationally, that Russia pays for the brutality that we are seeing in Ukraine.

Turkey and Syria Earthquakes

5. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support those affected by the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria. [904053]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): UK aid ranging from search and rescue to tents to medical care has helped thousands of survivors in Turkey and Syria, and more than 9,000 patients have been treated by UK medical teams as of 7 March.

Mark Menzies: Last night I was honoured to speak to members of the British-Turkish community to learn about the ongoing aid effort to help those impacted by the disaster. I was also fortunate to visit Gaziantep in 2019 with our late friend Sir David Amess, where I met families displaced by the war in Syria. It is heartbreaking to see so many of these people having to rebuild their lives once again. Will my right hon. Friend commit to

ensuring this Government's efforts go beyond initial disaster relief and provide long-term support for those in the region to rebuild their lives, their homes and their businesses?

Mr Mitchell: Since the Syria crisis began, as my hon. Friend knows, Britain has contributed something like £3.8 billion, which is more than the whole European Union has provided added together. We will certainly focus on that. For now, the British taxpayer has found £43 million and the Disasters Emergency Committee has raised £100 million. All across the country, people are responding magnificently to this crisis. In my constituency, the Sutton Coldfield chamber choir will be playing at a concert at St Columba's church on Saturday night to raise money for Turkish victims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): More than 850,000 children remain displaced after the earthquake that hit in early February, with many of these children now in temporary shelters. What discussions have Ministers had with Turkish officials to ensure that all is done to return children to a place of safety, to locate their families and to educate them?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right on all counts. Immediately after the crisis, Education Cannot Wait allocated \$7 million to try to ensure that children, particularly those out of school, could get back into education. We will continue with our efforts to ensure people who suffered so much from the earthquake are remedied in every way we can.

Iran: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

6. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' role in Iran's internal repression and activity in the region. [904054]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The UK will continue to hold the Iranian regime, including the IRGC, to account for its repression. We have imposed sanctions on the individuals involved in the repression of women in Iran, and we continue to sanction the IRGC in its entirety.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mark, wait for two questions.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for his answer, but the evidence of the IRGC's brutality in Iran, particularly towards women, is clear. The evidence of its wider malign influence in the region is clear. Likewise its links supporting Russia and its reach to Europe, including threats on these shores. How much more evidence do he and the Government need to see before they do what I have asked many times in this Chamber and proscribe the IRGC?

James Cleverly: As I said, the IRGC is already sanctioned in its entirety. Where it is involved in illegal activity, our security forces and police take action, and I commend

the action they take. We do not routinely discuss future designations and sanctions, but we will always take actions that protect the British people and British interests and that deter malign activity.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), I have repeatedly come to this Chamber to ask about proscribing the IRGC, which is widely recognised on both sides of the House as a bunch of clerical fascists and homicidal maniacs who particularly enjoy torturing and murdering women. I suspect the Foreign Secretary agrees with us, so why does he not take the final step and proscribe the IRGC?

James Cleverly: The actions this Government take with regard to the IRGC are to deter its malign activity within its own borders, within the region and here in the UK and to protect British citizens, including dual nationals, and British interests overseas. We will always act in accordance with those principles. As I say, the UK Government do not routinely speculate on future designations.

Argentina: 2016 Joint Communiqué on the Falklands

8. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of Argentina's decision to withdraw from the 2016 joint communiqué on the Falklands. [904056]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The Argentine Government's decision is disappointing for the Falkland Islands, for the UK and for Argentina. There are many areas in which our countries stand to gain from working together positively, including on the humanitarian effort to identify fallen Argentine service personnel from the 1982 conflict. The joint communiqué covers all these areas and more. The Argentine Government's decision hurts our mutually beneficial bilateral co-operation, and it further damages the Falkland islanders' confidence in their intentions, which is why Argentina should reconsider its decision. We are working closely with the Falkland islanders to identify next steps.

Rob Butler: I was lucky enough to visit the Falkland Islands a few weeks ago with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and from meeting local people there it was clear that they powerfully and passionately stand by the referendum result of exactly 10 years ago, when more than 90% voted for the Falklands to remain a British overseas territory. That makes Argentina's recent unilateral decision to abandon the joint communiqué all the more outrageous. What are the Government doing to make it clear to the Argentines that the Falkland Islanders have the unequivocal right to self-determination and how the UK will protect that in practice?

David Rutley: It would be remiss of me not to welcome the 10th anniversary of the referendum on the future of the Falkland Islands. It is only for the people of the Falkland Islands to decide their own future. We consistently make clear to Argentina and to international partners our unbending support for the Falkland Islanders and their self-determination rights.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Falklands are British and that is the end of the story. Santiago Cafiero is undoubtedly engaging in a bit of electioneering during a general election, and we should just—*[Interruption.]* Exactly as the Foreign Secretary just indicated, we should not be surprised when these things are said.

Many of my constituents lost loved ones killed on the Sir Galahad in the defence of the Falklands many years ago and some of them are worried that some papers have not been published yet and will not be until 2065. They would like to see the full papers that were provided to the board of inquiry, so will the Minister investigate whether those can now be published?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making those points in his original remarks. There are usual processes to go through, but I will take those points away and discuss them with the Minister for overseas territories.

Tunisia: Human Rights

10. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the human rights situation in Tunisia. [904058]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): We are concerned by the recent wide-ranging arrests in Tunisia, including those of politicians, former civil servants, businesspeople and media representatives. The UK underlines the importance of due legal process and respect for human rights, especially freedoms of expression and association. Tunisians should have the space for legitimate political opposition, civil society and independent media activity.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the Minister for that answer, but President Kais is seeking to impose one-man rule in Tunisia, including with a sham Parliament and the arrest of critics. He now appears to be looking for scapegoats, such as black Africans, to distract attention from the dire economic and social situation. Will the Minister condemn what is happening now in Tunisia and support those working for democratic and tolerant governance in the country?

David Rutley: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister for north Africa, publicly commented on this matter on 16 February. He has also raised the issue with the Tunisian chargé d'affaires, and G7 ambassadors in Tunisia have also made a number of joint statements since July 2021. We are also aware of reports of racially motivated discrimination and violence towards perceived sub-Saharan African migrants, and we encourage Tunisia to comply with the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.

Persecuted Christians: Bishop of Truro's Review

12. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's review. [904060]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We welcome the independent review by the Bishop of Truro and ensure that it is central to our human rights work.

Fiona Bruce: Almost a year after the expert independent review, which highlighted that there is still much work to be done to fully implement the Truro review, can the Minister point out what progress the FCDO has made in better advocating for those who are persecuted for their religion or belief? Not least, will he confirm that, as our manifesto promised and in accordance with recommendation 6 of the Truro review, the role of Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief will now be established in law?

Mr Mitchell: I want to thank my hon. Friend for all her work and commitment in this vital area. Who can doubt that she, like my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) before her, is the very personification and essence of how this role should be performed? Last July we had an international ministerial conference to advance FORB and we always regularly raise cases of concern. On recommendation 6, she makes an extremely good point and the Government are considering it.

Beneficial Ownership Transparency Measures

13. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to encourage adoption of beneficial ownership transparency measures by (a) G20 nations and (b) offshore tax havens and secrecy jurisdictions. [904061]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We are working with a range of jurisdictions, including G20 nations, and global financial centres to promote beneficial ownership transparency and to make it a global norm.

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend has a superb personal track record on this issue. May I urge him to redouble his efforts? Does he accept that transparency about who owns what means that oligarchs, kleptocrats and crime lords have fewer places to stash their dirty cash; that it is the single cheapest and most effective measure that any country can take to cut the social and economic costs that international criminality imposes; and that it becomes ever more powerful as the network of truly transparent jurisdictions grows?

Mr Mitchell: Open registers of beneficial ownership are extremely important. My hon. Friend and I, and indeed the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), did a lot of work on that from the Back Benches, and it is now Government policy. All overseas territories and Crown dependencies are committed to open registers. All have made voluntary commitments, and the Government intend to make sure that they stand by those commitments.

Cox's Bazar Refugee Camp

16. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support those affected by the recent fire in the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. [904064]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I was in Cox's Bazar just on Saturday, when I was able to visit the site of the terrible fire that affected 12,000 people

and destroyed 2,000 homes. I was able to announce a new package of funding of £5.26 million to support the Rohingya, and to meet the agencies that are all working at incredible pace to help them to rebuild their homes.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for her answer and for making that important visit. She will be aware that the UN Food Programme has announced that it has been forced to reduce rations for Rohingya refugees by 17% because of wider funding cuts. Despite her recent announcement, UK aid for the Rohingya refugee crisis has gone down by just over 80% since 2020. How can that be justified when this population has faced genocide at the hands of the Burmese military? Has she discussed with the Chancellor restoring the overall aid budget, which is the best way to ensure that we tackle refugee crises?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK has been a leading donor to the Rohingya crisis, providing over £350 million since 2017. Last week at the UN, the joint response plan was published; it is only just over 40% funded so far, so we will be working with our friends across the world to find the funding to support it completely.

Nigerian Elections

18. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What plans he has for engagement with the Government of Nigeria and other interested parties following the recent elections in that country. [904066]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I had the pleasure of meeting all the front-runner candidates ahead of the election, and officials have continued engagement with a range of counterparts throughout.

Chi Onwurah: The UK has a vibrant and engaged Nigerian diaspora. I know; I count myself one of them. Ndi Igbo North East England, in my constituency, has expressed concerns about serious failures of technology, security and communications in last month's presidential elections, as has the European Union. Given that the Government have provided financial support to Nigerian civil society on election integrity, and technical advice to the Nigerian independent national electoral commission, what does the Minister think went wrong?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right to say that we provided £5 million of taxpayer's money to civil society, to boost citizen education and voter engagement; also, the British high commission deployed observers to polling stations across seven states. We commend all those involved for their commitment to democracy and, importantly in respect of her question, to resolving disputes through the courts and through peaceful means.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am enormously grateful, Mr Speaker. Nigeria is a fast-growing country and connections between our communities are flourishing, so if Nigerians lose trust in their political institutions, it will affect our prosperity and security too. Yet the Government's development support for Nigeria has been slashed, our offer is lacking and our voice is weak.

Surely we need to develop a strategy for partnership in Nigeria and across the whole of Africa. How is the Minister going to deliver on that?

Mr Mitchell: We are working incredibly closely with all our partners across Africa, none more so than Nigeria. We have been heavily engaged in recent events. We note that the gubernatorial elections have been rescheduled for 18 March, but the Government have congratulated President-elect Tinubu. We look forward to working with his Administration and dealing with exactly the matters that the hon. Lady has so eloquently raised.

Topical Questions

T1. [904074] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Yesterday I set out how the Government will ensure that the country remains safe, prosperous and influential. In San Diego yesterday afternoon the Prime Minister, alongside President Biden and Prime Minister Albanese, announced that we will deliver a multi-billion-pound conventionally armed but nuclear-powered submarine capability to the Royal Australian Navy.

Last month we negotiated the Windsor framework for Northern Ireland with our European Union colleagues, and last week at the UK-French summit we struck a deal that will help to stop the boats bringing illegal migrants to the UK.

On Ukraine, the UK stands ready to provide a further \$500 million of World Bank loan guarantees to cover the cost of vital Government services. We are accelerating delivery of our £2.3 billion-worth of military aid and Challenger tanks and will keep—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Matt Vickers.

Matt Vickers: On behalf of the people of Stockton South, I offer our deepest condolences to the families of victims of last month's devastating Turkish-Syrian earthquake. I was glad to see the Government's fast response in sending humanitarian aid, but can my right hon. Friend ensure that the UK will assist both Syria and Turkey in elaborating strategies to prevent any future natural disaster from having such a devastatingly high fatality rate?

James Cleverly: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Development Minister, who travelled to the region shortly after the earthquakes, keeping a close eye on the swift financial and technical response we deployed. I can assure both my hon. Friend and the House that we will continue to pay close attention to the humanitarian need as a direct result of the series of earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In recent weeks, allies in the US and EU have moved to ban TikTok from Government phones, but the UK Government's response is to say that it is a personal

choice. Will the Foreign Secretary clarify whether the Government will recommend a Government agency ban, or whether the UK will be behind the curve again?

James Cleverly: As it is a security matter, this issue is taken up by the Security Minister, which is a Home Office competency.

T3. [904076] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Last week, the UK warned that the regime in Tehran is now dangerously close to weapons-related activities, after Iran was caught enriching uranium to 83.7% by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Considering that Iran has systematically escalated its nuclear activities in the face of diplomatic efforts, does my right hon. Friend agree that the time has now come for a snapback in sanctions, as enshrined in the joint comprehensive plan of action?

James Cleverly: We continue to work closely with our international partners and the leadership of the IAEA on Iran's nuclear activities. Our position is clear: it is unacceptable for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon or nuclear weapon technology. We will continue to work with our international allies to prevent that from happening.

T2. [904075] **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for aid match. The Government funding rounds for UK Aid Match and the Gavi and Malaria match funds ended in 2023 and totalled £377 million, which represents just 0.3% of UK overseas development assistance. When will the next round of aid match be announced, how much will be announced and will the Government increase the percentage of ODA that is aid matched?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The hon. Gentleman is quite right to accentuate the importance of aid match, which has done an enormous amount to swell the funds that can be deployed. I will come back to the House as soon as we are able to set out the amounts we will be spending in the next financial year and, I hope, in the financial year thereafter as well.

T4. [904077] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There are striking parallels between the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the 1974 invasion of Cyprus by Turkey. Both involved aggressive incursions into the sovereign territory of another country. Will the Foreign Secretary call on Turkey to remove its troops from Cyprus and enable Cypriots to determine their own future?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The UK led the international response to Turkish actions in 1974, including through drafting UN Security Council resolution 353 calling for the immediate withdrawal of Turkish troops. The best way to address the situation in Cyprus is through a just and lasting settlement, in line with the UN parameters based on the model of a bizonal, bicomunal federation, and the UK will continue to engage actively in pursuit of that.

T6. [904079] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Many people who come here on small boats are fleeing war where this country has sold weapons, natural disasters where this Government have given up on tackling climate change, and hunger and disease where this Government have slashed the aid budget. How does anything in yesterday's integrated review tackle the push factors that cause so much displacement and migration in the first place?

Mr Mitchell: The integrated review published yesterday sets out a comprehensive approach to dealing with all those issues, including migration in particular. Migration is a complex area that requires a whole series of different interventions. There is, alas, no silver bullet.

T5. [904078] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The behaviour of Iran is increasingly concerning, particularly that of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) said earlier. What more will my right hon. Friend do, particularly by working with our allies, to ensure that we attack that threat head on?

James Cleverly: We have sanctioned individuals and entities in response to their malign behaviour, including the sanctioning of the IRGC in its entirety. We continue to work very closely with our international allies and friends in the region to deter Iran and the IRGC from further such actions.

T7. [904080] **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): I was in Ukraine two weeks ago, where I heard stories of horrific war crimes by Russian forces against the Ukrainian people, including sexual crimes and rapes of children as young as four and of women as old as 90. What are the Government doing to ensure that a special tribunal is set up for the crime of aggression?

James Cleverly: We continue to work with the International Criminal Court on ensuring that it is able to bring people to justice. We are working closely with our friends internationally to look at what other legal vehicles we may need to ensure that everybody—from perpetrators and facilitators right up to the decision makers in Moscow—is held to account for the brutality and perverse actions taken by Russian troops in Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, after giving assurances that it would not carry out death penalties, has just executed Hussein Abo al-Kheir, a father of eight. Will the Foreign Secretary try to arrange to make a statement to the House later this week on the ramifications for our relationship with Saudi Arabia, recognising people such as 14-year-old Abdullah al-Huwaiti, who was tortured into making a confession for a crime that he could not have committed?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The UK strongly opposes the death penalty in all countries and circumstances. We regularly raise our concerns with the Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia is well aware of the UK's opposition to the death penalty.

T8. [904081] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): To follow the question asked by the Father of the House, Hussein Abo al-Kheir was executed in Saudi Arabia on Sunday, despite allegations that he had been severely tortured and calls from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to halt his execution. Last year, the number of people executed in Saudi Arabia reached a record high, with 81 people killed in a single day. Can the Minister explain further how the UK is working with our international allies?

David Rutley: As I said, we strongly oppose the death penalty in all countries and circumstances. On the al-Kheir situation, Lord Ahmad has raised that case with the Saudi ambassador, the Saudi vice-Foreign Minister and the president of the Saudi human rights commission on multiple occasions since November, including during his visit to the kingdom in February.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The abduction, so-called re-education and illegal adoption of 6,000 Ukrainian children is an act of genocide. So far, the UK has sanctioned only two Russian governors who are complicit in that activity, which has clearly been learned from China in Tibet and Xinjiang. Will we now back the Avaaz campaign and sanction the further eight responsible individuals, including the directors of the so-called boarding houses for Ukrainian children?

James Cleverly: The abduction, forcible deportation and—to all intents and purposes—kidnapping of Ukrainian children is a terrible and perverse act. I assure my hon. Friend and the House that we will not rest until the people who are involved in that are held to account. She will know that we do not routinely discuss future sanctions designations, but I can assure her that, with our international partners, we look very closely at that terrible state of affairs.

T9. [904082] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): A loophole in the sanctions regime means that Russian steel is rolled in countries such as Turkey and then imported to the UK. The Foreign Secretary will know that the UK is the only country in the G20 where steel production is declining, and our domestic steel production is essential to our support for Ukraine. Will he follow the lead of the EU, which is closing the loophole in the regime, and tell us when the UK will also close the loophole?

David Rutley: There was a lively debate on this in Westminster Hall last week. I can confirm that our sanctions regimes are under constant review, and our enforcement activity at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in particular will be focused on these issues.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In the least developed countries, over half of health centres do not have hand-washing facilities, and I recently saw the benefits of delivering those during a trip to Ghana with the charity WasteAid. The Government's new health position papers contain approaches to integrate water, sanitation and hygiene within health programming. Will the Minister

commit to progress the implementation of that, to raise standards of hygiene and reduce levels of infection across the developing world?

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The crisis in Kashmir now spans across nine decades and, today, those living in the region still face unimaginable human rights abuses. Police brutality, arbitrary arrest and the repression of journalists there are still too common. Will the Minister ensure that the plight of the Kashmiris is not forgotten, and will he launch a renewed effort to facilitate dialogue between Pakistan and India, so that a political solution can be found?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The UK's long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution on Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of Kashmiri people. We continue to monitor the situation and encourage both countries to engage in dialogue and to find those lasting diplomatic solutions to maintain regional stability.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): The Ukrainian economy is suffering immeasurably because of the war imposed by Russia. One of the things that would help the Ukrainian economy now and post conflict is more joint ventures with western multinationals, which help with not just economic growth but governance reforms. What steps are we taking to help Ukrainian companies to partner with western multinationals?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes the right point. As well as ensuring that the Russians who have violated Ukraine repair the damage they have caused, there will be a need for a long-term relationship to rebuild the Ukrainian economy. UK Export Finance will help British-based companies to help Ukrainians rebuild their homeland once we have helped them to successfully defend themselves against this invasion.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): For the past 15 months, my team and I have been battling to bring five British children who are in hiding in Kabul to safety. Their British father was blown up by the Taliban. Their Afghan mother will not be granted a visa by the Home Office and they are too young to travel alone. Neither the Foreign Office nor the Home Office are responding to my correspondence on this case. Please will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers grant me an urgent meeting, so that we can bring this family to safety?

James Cleverly: I will look into the point that the hon. Lady has made about her correspondence not being responded to, and I will—[*Interruption.*] I will, of course, take the opportunity to meet with her to find out the situation. As she knows, we do not have a consular presence in Afghanistan, but our consular teams in neighbouring countries provide remote support for British nationals overseas.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Earlier in this session, we heard about the importance of respecting self-determination when it comes to the future of the Falkland

Islands. Can my right hon. Friend update the House with regard to consultations with the Chagossian people on the future of the British Indian Ocean Territory?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend Lord Goldsmith had a meeting with representatives of the Chagossian community. We will ensure that, as far as we can, we keep those lines of communication open.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On 25 January, in the urgent question on whether the Government had assisted the Wagner Group in circumventing UK sanctions, I asked the Minister, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), how many exceptions and waivers to the rules there had been over the past two years. The Minister said that a letter would be sent to me. It is now 14 March, so will the Foreign Secretary ensure that that letter is sent to me?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that issue to my attention. I will find out why there has been such a protracted delay, and ensure that he gets a response in good time.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): Whether China is a threat, a challenge, an opportunity or all of the above, the UK's response to it will surely be enhanced by better Chinese language skills. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he is doing what he can with colleagues in Government to improve the UK's capacity in that regard?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In the integrated review published yesterday, we set out a comprehensive list of tools that we will be using to help us to continue to grow our Mandarin speakers, and more widely as well. I recommend that all Members of the House have a fulsome read of the integrated review in due course.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): AerCap is the largest provider of commercial aircraft in the world and, after the imposition of sanctions, it required a number of leased aircraft in Russia to be returned. That has not happened; instead, those aircraft have been re-registered in Russia, and continue to fly and operate. I know that there is a court case on the issue of loss with the insurance industry, but do the Government consider that to be an example of sanctions evasion?

James Cleverly: It is very difficult for me to come to an assessment based just on the points made in the hon. Gentleman's question. I am more than happy to look at the matter in more detail, if he will write to me about it or catch me privately. As I say, with regard to the legal action, he will understand that the Government cannot comment while that is ongoing.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I recently visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and what I saw made a deep and lasting impression on me. Does the Minister agree with me and with former Israeli ambassador Ilan Baruch, whom I met yesterday, that the UK and others must stop giving Israel impunity for its illegal actions under international law and again become serious and active players for peace?

James Cleverly: I assure the hon. Lady that we want nothing more than peace in that region. I have visited the OPTs and have met representatives of the Palestinian Authority and Israelis. Of course, it is in everybody's interest that we have peace in the region: it is in the interests both of Israelis and Palestinians and of the wider region. That will continue to be at the heart of UK foreign policy in the region.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I am grateful for the many pieces of correspondence I have had from the Foreign Office regarding the death of my constituent's son abroad—the many parliamentary questions and binary interactions across this Chamber. Will the Foreign Secretary meet me to discuss the finer points that will allow my constituent closure in this case?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman has been a great champion and advocate for his constituent, and officials have continued to keep him informed. I will be happy to meet with him to discuss the case more fully, if he wishes.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): British nationals Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof still remain incarcerated in Iran. What is the Foreign Secretary going to do to bring them home?

James Cleverly: I assure the right hon. Lady that we continue to make every effort to support British dual nationals incarcerated in Iran. This remains an ongoing piece of work, and she will understand that it is not always possible, or in the best interests of the individuals, for us to go into details. However, I assure her that it remains a priority for the UK, and is one of the reasons why it is important that we maintain a bilateral diplomatic relationship with Iran.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will be well aware of the huge demonstrations in Israel opposing the Government's plans to control the judiciary, which will undermine the rule of law—a situation described by the President of Israel yesterday as “very serious”. Does the Foreign Secretary share President Herzog's concerns?

James Cleverly: Ultimately, of course, the Government of Israel need to understand that they have a responsibility to the people of Israel. We always suggest that, when there are protests, Governments listen to why those protests are happening, and of course, we want to see Israel abide by the rule of law.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The Russell Group has co-ordinated new research, highlighting the scale of the ongoing delays in the academic technology approval scheme, which is having a detrimental impact on students, research projects and universities. These delays have already led to businesses retracting funding and PhD applicants withdrawing from UK opportunities. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Cabinet colleagues about that, and will he meet me to discuss the Russell Group findings?

James Cleverly: We recognise that international students coming to UK universities is an incredibly important part of our economy. That is important for our soft

power internationally, and it is one of those things where the knowledge that those students take back to their countries of origin helps those countries, too. We recognise how important it is, and I will continue to work with other Departments to ensure that our international offer to students remains top quality.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The global crisis of malnutrition threatens the lives of 200 million people. Will the Development Minister look to support my early-day motion 951, which seeks to welcome the Bridgetown agenda, which will transform the mission, the model and the money in the global finance development architecture? Now is not the time for half measures.

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that Government Ministers do not normally sign early-day motions, but in respect of his point about Bridgetown, there is no more important agenda around internationally.

We need to ensure that we turn billions into trillions, as the rich world has promised repeatedly at recent conferences of the parties, and the Bridgetown agenda is in very large part the way we do that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I was honoured to attend the UN Commission on the Status of Women last week, where I heard from the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts about its #SheSurfsFreedom survey, which highlighted the impact that online harassment, misogyny and abuse are having on girls around the world. Can I ask what actions the Minister intends to take to work with partners to ensure a free and equal digital future?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, and I will study the results of those events, if she will make them available to me. Then the Government will consider what, in addition to what we are doing already, we may be able to do.

HS2: Revised Timetable and Budget

12.42 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the revised timetable and budget for completion of HS2.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Although we notified the House first about Thursday's announcement, I start by apologising for the timing of the written ministerial statement, which I accept was discourteous to Members and to you, Mr Speaker.

As part of the largest capital programme ever committed, the Transport Secretary last week confirmed more than £40 billion in transport investment over the next two financial years. This will enable the opening stage of HS2 to be delivered on schedule. By 2033, passengers and communities will benefit from high-speed rail services between new stations at Old Oak Common in London and Curzon Street in Birmingham, but the House will also be aware that we face significant economic headwinds. Record inflation caused by Putin's illegal war and ongoing global supply chain issues have ramped up construction costs, making capital projects more difficult to deliver. It means we must make responsible decisions on which parts of our capital programme we can deliver within current budgets and timeframes.

While we remain committed fully to HS2, we will need to rephrase the delivery options as part of the project due to inflationary pressures and the need to spread costs. Between Birmingham and Crewe, we expect to push back construction by two years, with an aim to deliver high-speed services as soon as possible after accounting for the delay in construction. We also remain committed to delivering HS2 services to Euston, but will take time to ensure an affordable and deliverable station design, which means delivering Euston alongside the high-speed infrastructure to Manchester. While HS2 Ltd and Network Rail continue work on developing HS2 east, we are also considering the most effective way to run HS2 trains to Leeds.

The Prime Minister promised to place trust and accountability at the heart of this Government. That means strengthening connectivity across the country while managing public finances effectively. It means never shirking the tough, but necessary decisions as we deliver on the people's priorities to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt.

Iain Stewart: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. As Chair of the Select Committee, we feel that there was not enough detail on a number of areas in Thursday's statement, so I would be grateful if my hon. Friend gave further detail.

First, my hon. Friend rightly references inflationary cost pressures in construction, which are affecting all sorts of projects up and down the country, but the written ministerial statement also referenced other "increased project costs". What are they? Is he satisfied that HS2 Ltd has a grip on its finances? Secondly, the statement said that Old Oak Common to Birmingham will be finished "as soon as possible". What does that mean? Is there a delay to the planned opening date?

Thirdly, what is the reason for the delay to the Euston to Old Oak Common section? Is it purely down to costs or are there other reasons for a redesign? A lot of construction work is happening at Euston now, so should the redesign not have been identified earlier? Finally, when can we expect to see further detail on HS2 east, the integrated rail plan and the Leeds route options? The industry and the public require—nay, demand—certainty on this. Can we be assured that this is the last delay to the project?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Transport Committee for his questions. I will provide some answers, but there will no doubt be further detail to discuss as we go through the session.

On my hon. Friend's question about the increased project costs, they chiefly relate to the opening section of the line in phase 1, which is the part that is under construction at the moment. We are spending about £600 million a month on phase 1 construction, which is at its peak. He rightly talks about inflation; the Office for National Statistics shows that construction inflation is running at about 15%, which is why we have an issue with costs. He is right to say, however, that we need to bear down on costs. Yesterday, I met the chief executive of HS2 Ltd. I am delighted with the appointment of the chairman, Sir Jon Thompson, who has a background in finance. Certainly, it is within HS2's requirements to ensure that, where we have inflationary pressures, it fills the gap by bearing down on costs.

My hon. Friend asked what finishing Old Oak Common to Curzon Street "as soon as possible" means. As I stated in my opening remarks, we expect that, by 2033, passengers and communities will benefit from high-speed rail services between those two stations. He asked about the reason for the Euston delay. Euston was always scheduled for delivery after the opening of phase 1, which is why we are prioritising Old Oak Common. We will not proceed with construction at Euston in the next two years, due to affordability and profiling issues, but we will use that time to work with partners to ensure an affordable and deliverable design.

My hon. Friend asks for detail on HS2 east, the integrated rail plan and the Leeds route study. I will be writing to him on the back of the integrated rail plan report this month and further information will be tabled in the six-monthly HS2 report, which is due in May. On the Leeds route strategy, it has been cleared by the Department and we expect it to be published soon.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the industry needs certainty, and I believe he asked whether we can be certain that this is the last change to the project. Although the pandemic and Putin's illegal invasion of Russia were not anticipated, we expect these HS2 plans to be the plans that deliver it from London to Manchester.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Eighteen months ago, the Government slashed Northern Powerhouse Rail, binned HS2 to Leeds and sold out the north of England. Here we are again: huge changes affecting billions in investment and jobs announced at 5 pm on Thursday—minutes before the House rose.

We now know why the Secretary of State was desperate to dodge scrutiny: I have a leaked document written by his most senior officials that blows apart his claims and

[*Louise Haigh*]

lays bare the consequences of the decisions he has hidden from. His chief justification for the delays to HS2 was to “balance the nation’s books”, but his Department admits what he will not—that the delays themselves will increase costs. It admits that they will cost jobs and that construction firms could go bust; it cannot rule out slashing high-speed trains that serve Stoke, Macclesfield and Stafford altogether; and it suggests that HS2 could terminate on the outskirts of London until 2041.

Is it not time that the Minister came clean that this absurd plan will hit jobs, hurt growth and cost taxpayers even more? As his own officials ask,

“you have already changed the design once, which wasted money. What will be different this time?”

Even the Government have lost faith in this Government, and little wonder. Is there anything more emblematic of this failed Government than their flagship levelling-up project that makes it neither to the north nor to central London? Last year they crashed the economy, and once again they are asking the country to pay the price. Does this announcement not prove once and for all that the Conservatives cannot fix the problem because the Conservatives are the problem.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Lady, but we obviously do not comment on leaked documents, certainly not documents that I have not been given. I say to the hon. Lady that it is an entirely responsible Government approach to balance the commitments we make—as I have stated, the transport commitments that have been set out to the House total £40 billion—and, indeed, to reflect on how the delivery of HS2 had been designed. It is also well within a responsible Government’s remit to consider the public spending pressures that there are right now, due to the help that this Government have given to those facing increased energy costs and the continued costs from the pandemic, and therefore the impact on the amount of borrowing. Over £100 billion is required each year, or it was last year, to service the overdraft, which is greater than the amount we spend on defence. It would be entirely irresponsible for any Government to look at all of its portfolio without those figures in mind.

However, I am very proud of what we are doing on delivering HS2. The construction of the Curzon Street station in Birmingham, which remains, as I have stated, is expected to create 36,000 new jobs. On the hon. Lady’s point about not levelling up across the country, the redevelopment of Piccadilly station in Manchester is expected to create 13,000 new homes. In London, the regeneration of Old Oak Common will contribute £15 billion over the next 30 years. Those are figures to be proud of, and we will deliver them.

I found it very helpful, at the end of last week, to discuss this with stakeholders from across the country—businesses, regional organisations, council leaders and Mayors on the route—who were all very supportive about what the Government are doing. They also have to run budgets—unlike the Opposition—so they understood the pressures that the country faces, and were absolutely delighted that this project will continue to be built.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): For Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, HS2 means a huge amount of pain for little to no gain. I am extremely concerned, as are many of the people I have heard from, that phase 2 will actually reduce capacity on some existing services. Will the Minister use this pause to look again at whether more of the investment should be spent on upgrading the existing network to ensure that we better connect places such as Stoke-on-Trent and Stafford?

Huw Merriman: To make it absolutely clear, we remain committed to the delivery of HS2 from London Euston up to Manchester. The extra time that can be afforded—that was a great conversation I had with the council leaders and Mayors—will be used to assess and improve the design, if necessary, but we will not be taken off the track of London Euston to Manchester. I look forward to more contributions from my hon. Friend, who knows I am committed to delivering transport in his area, and I do see HS2 as part of that solution.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I almost feel sorry for the Minister—almost. Mr Speaker, you will know that the north of England has seen cut after cut not just to HS2, but to any real modernisation of its rail network, with HS2 to Leeds cancelled and Northern Powerhouse Rail cut to the bone. We on the SNP Benches have supported HS2 because we believe increased sustainable connectivity is to all our benefit. However, what we have now is a gold-plated commuter line of just over 100 miles for two cities in the south of this island, costing nearly £50 billion, while the rest of the country is expected to fight for scraps from the table.

Combined with the announcement of slashed funding for active travel, which leaves England, outside of Greater London, receiving less than £1 per person per year—30 times less than Scotland—that makes it clear that the Government regard transport funding outside the M25 as nothing more than a rounding error. Thankfully, we in Scotland have a Parliament and a Government investing in our rail network, investing in active travel and taking transport decarbonisation seriously, so can the Minister tell me in which decade high-speed rail will reach the Scottish border?

Huw Merriman: The Government are plainly not committed only to delivery between London and Birmingham, because the entire plan is predicated on a two-year rephasing of the parts going up towards Crewe from the midlands. Beyond that, up to Manchester, the indicative timeline does not change at all. The Bill Select Committee remains in place, as does its brief, so that commitment is there. It is not a commitment just to the south-east, and the hon. Member has certainly got that wrong. The £96 billion integrated rail plan is based solely on the midlands and the north, and that shows this Government’s desire to level up across the midlands and the north, as opposed to spending money in the south-east.

Active travel is not part of this urgent question, but £3 billion will be spent by this Government on active travel during this Parliament. There are levelling-up

fund bids that go toward active travel. We are absolutely passionate and committed to the delivery of active travel, and that will continue, as will our delivery of HS2.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): So far, the Minister has rightly been talking about phase 1 and phase 2a, but not about phase 2b. My constituents and I are sick to death of waiting for the inevitable announcement that phase 2b is not happening. I have constituents who have been suffering for over a decade while preserved land kept aside has ruined their ability to sell their houses and forced them into compensation schemes. It is not going to happen—Mrs Miggins in the Dog and Duck knows it is not going to happen. So will the Minister stand at the Dispatch Box right now—not to talk to me about the integrated rail plan; I have been hearing that cobblers for three years—and tell me that my constituents will get their land released and stop having their lives blighted?

Huw Merriman: When the integrated rail plan was published, it made reference to a Leeds area study that needed to be published, which in itself would unlock money for a mass transit scheme for Leeds. We will shortly bring forward that route study, which will provide the answers on how HS2 trains can go up to Leeds. Until then, the safeguarding will remain in place. I am keen that we get those answers, so that we either find a solution to get HS2 trains up to Leeds—again, that will be down to the study and responses—or, if that is not possible, decisions will need to be made about land and property that is currently blighted. That will occur once the route study has been published and responded to.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I have great respect for the Minister, but I feel sorry for him today, because he is having to defend the completely worthless words of previous Secretaries of State for Transport, and Ministers, over a decade. Let me explain to him what is really happening. The Government are showing, yet again, their complete disdain for the north of England: no trans-Pennine investment, after 13 years of this Government; cuts to phase 2b; and cuts to the rest of high-speed rail. This is not about the economy because, when one looks at Crossrail 1, the Oxford-Cambridge link and all the rest of the investment in the south-east, there are no cuts. We have seen the Treasury take control of transport, putting the money where it always likes to—into London, not the north of England—and we know where that will lead. It will lead to tax cuts that will benefit the south of England at the start of next year for the general election.

Huw Merriman: I have the greatest respect for the hon. Member, and I served alongside him on the Transport Committee, but I take issue with him on there being no investment going into the north. The integrated rail plan is £96 billion of investment going to the north and the midlands. The HS2 statement commits to the completion of Old Oak Common to Curzon Street because that is where the construction is being delivered. It talks about a rephrasing of two years on the section that goes to Crewe, and on the line from Crewe to Manchester—phase 2b—there is no change to the indicative timeline at all. Once phase 2b is delivered, we will see the benefits of Northern Powerhouse Rail, which we are committed to as well. I could not speak to projects

in the south-east that are anything like those I have mentioned over the last minute, because the bulk of the investment in rail is going to the north and the midlands, and that will continue to be the case.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): In the three years that I was the Minister responsible for HS2, almost a decade ago, I commissioned work to see whether we could deliver the project more quickly by opening Birmingham to Old Oak Common ahead of Euston. The result came back that around two thirds—certainly more than half—of passengers would be getting off at Old Oak Common anyway, to use the Elizabeth line to access places such as Heathrow airport and Canary Wharf. Does the Minister agree that Old Oak Common will, for the majority of people, be the London terminus that they use, even when Euston is open?

Huw Merriman: I am glad my right hon. Friend mentioned Old Oak Common, because following the Oakervee review, that was anticipated to be the station where services would commence from 2033. Despite what may have been said, it is interesting to look at what we are doing with Old Oak Common. It will be the best connected and largest new railway station ever built in the UK. It will have 14 platforms and be one of the busiest railway stations in the country, with access to central London and Heathrow via the Elizabeth line, and connections to Wales and the south-east. Importantly, it will also allow us to deliver trains to Manchester in one hour and 11 minutes, which is 54 minutes quicker than at present. That demonstrates that the whole country benefits from Old Oak Common.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We all look forward to seeing more detail about the note that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) spoke about, but the least surprising thing she said was that the Government already know that these delays do not save money; they cost money. The increase in the cost of HS2 from £32 billion when the Government took power in 2010 to at least £71 billion, and escalating all the time, is precisely because of the delays and incompetence that the Government have shown, and their lack of commitment to HS2 over 13 years. My constituents in Chesterfield want HS2 to come, and we are desperate for the eastern leg. Will the Government acknowledge that what they are announcing today is a further increase in the cost of the project, and the further undermining of a crucial infrastructure project that the whole of the north demands?

Huw Merriman: As well as investing in the future, which we are doing, we must cover ourselves for the present. That is why three of the Prime Minister's five priorities are to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt. The reality for a project such as HS2 is that we have had to rephrase one of the elements by two years, and that the remainder will go ahead as we outlined previously. It is vital for any Government to take into account the current state of the economy, current spending requirements and the impact they have on inflation, and the cost of borrowing. I am proud to be part of a Government who take a balanced responsibility between investing in infrastructure for the future—and we absolutely are—and managing the day-to-day finances, which the Opposition are demonstrating they are not doing.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Lichfield is north of Birmingham, but it is also in phase 1. Currently, around the cathedral city there are huge amounts of engineering works and massive road closures. My constituents and I would like to know whether this pause will apply to Lichfield—in which case, will they make good and reopen the roads—or will the work carry on as if there were no pause in other parts of the network?

Huw Merriman: I engaged with my hon. Friend yesterday on that point, and I salute him for the manner in which he represents his constituents' interests. I recognise that this as a concern. As far as we are concerned, those parts of the HS2 network where construction is going on will be completed, and we will do that to the timescale I have talked about. I need to give my hon. Friend a little more clarity about what that will mean in terms of scaling, but as far as I am concerned, phase 1 will be completed and ready for us to deliver trains by 2033. I will talk to him further about this, and write to him as well.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): For well over a year from 2014 to 2015, I sat on the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill Select Committee, which usually had seven sittings a week. As a northern MP, I was gutted when we were told that the extension to the north was being delayed—another betrayal of the north. I thought that at least businesses such as Booth Industries in Bolton South East, which builds train doors and is ready to be part of the supply, could benefit. When will the Government start taking action, invest in our economy and support our jobs, or will it be the same continuous mismanagement of the past 13 years of broken promises?

Huw Merriman: That does not stack up at all. Almost 30,000 people are employed by HS2—I met the 1,000th apprentice a few weeks ago, who was playing her part. Some 2,500 companies registered in the UK are delivering on HS2, and 60% of those are small or medium-sized enterprises. We are talking about a rephasing by two years of a stretch of the line to Crewe. There is currently no construction on that part of the line, and land possessions and dealing with business matters will continue. I ask the hon. Lady to put the investment into context.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): HS2 goes from the very bottom to the very top of my constituency, and I am extremely glad that the Minister has agreed to come to see my constituents soon—I wish he would confirm that. We have put in some proposals called phase 1-plus. Those are very important, and the delay should help to work through them.

On a personal note, many of my constituents are aware that work is continuing now, despite the announced delay. They are suffering from extreme stress, bullying and harassment, of the kind described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). Staff have taken possession of their homes against their will, without adequate or timely compensation, and of land that they do not need. One example is Mr John Evanson, aged 79. He was born on his farm, where he worked his entire life, but it has been taken away from him. He and his partner are now prisoners in their own home, surrounded by fencing and with as

many as eight security guards, which is utterly intolerable. Will the Minister guarantee to look into that issue and sort it out?

Huw Merriman: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and to discuss cases brought by my colleagues and Members across the House. It is essential that HS2 treats those whose land is being possessed or worked on nearby with compassion, and offers the right element of compensation. A lot of good work has been done by my predecessors on that front, but we know that there is more to do and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that case. Indeed, I have offered to view some of those cases to get a better understanding.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Delaying HS2 will not reduce the environmental or financial costs already incurred, but it will reduce any value that the project ever claimed to have. Why not admit that this was a mistake, and scrap HS2 altogether?

Huw Merriman: I will take that as Liberal Democrat policy from now on. It is important that all parties have a shared policy. On the ecological benefits of HS2—I have viewed some of them—the area around Colne valley where the chalk is being tunnelled will create a new chalk habitat, and I have seen that for myself. There will be no net loss to biodiversity as the route goes up to Birmingham, and as it goes beyond there will be an ecology gain of 10%. In my view, HS2 is a force for good not just through decarbonisation and what that does for the environment, but in respect of ecology and the legacy it will leave.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Instead of tinkering with the edges of HS2, would it not be better to admit that we cannot afford it as a country, that it has ruined livelihoods up and down the area where construction has commenced, and that it brings massive environmental destruction with it? Would it not be better to scrap it altogether? Does my hon. Friend agree that if he is to persist in building phase 1, among the cuts and budget reductions, not a penny will be taken from the mitigations put in place for residents who suffer real human misery under the construction of this project?

Huw Merriman: May I thank my hon. Friend? It was a pleasure to visit him and see some of the impacts in Buckinghamshire, which he so ably represents. I absolutely accept, as does HS2 Ltd, that right now HS2 is at the peak of construction—I referenced the amount being spent each month—which means the impact is probably at its greatest for residents. That will reduce as the line is delivered to Curzon Street, which it will be. We remain committed to delivery, but we are also committed to ensuring that we work with hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend, on mitigation measures. I am very happy to discuss with him further what more we can do to assist his constituents, but I have to be absolutely clear that we are delivering HS2 to Curzon Street in the time specified. It will continue to take place. I am very proud of that delivery and I want to thank everyone who is doing it.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The consequences of this announcement for Old Oak Common include doubts about the capacity of the Elizabeth line; limited interchange between lines at the station, especially for

disabled people; very limited access to the station site; and the postponement of development of HS2 land until after Euston opens. Will the Minister meet me and other MPs who are concerned about the indefinite delay to Euston opening to discuss the consequences for my constituents, which are game changing?

Huw Merriman: I try to make myself available to all colleagues across the House, and I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. To be clear, Old Oak Common is a massive regeneration opportunity that is being realised for west London. As I have stated, it will be one of the largest train stations delivered. It offers connectivity not just into London via the Elizabeth line, but to the west country and Wales via Great Western Railway. One amazing thing about Old Oak Common when I visited was that rather than lorry loads of spoil being taken away through the community, a conveyor has been built so we can use the existing freight line to take the spoil away. That is better not only for costs but for the environment, so I am very proud of the work being done at Old Oak Common. I would be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): The Minister detailed the impact on various economies in England, but will he make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the new timing of the construction of HS2 between Birmingham and Crewe on the economy of north Wales?

Huw Merriman: More detail will be added when the six monthly report for HS2 comes before the House. We also have the enhancement pipeline, which we will look to publish in the months to come. That will detail the investments we can make off the back of HS2. My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the benefits that accrue from HS2: not just passenger trains on the existing network, but the ability to take freight off the existing line. I am very happy to take further representations from her. She is very passionate about projects for north Wales and we will continue to talk.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Despite having been repeatedly promised that HS2 to Leeds would be built, the Government broke their word. At the time, they promised they would look at the most effective way to run HS2 trains to Leeds, but just now, in answer to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), the Minister speculated—if I heard him correctly—on what he would do about safeguarding land if it does not prove possible to do that. Can he clarify whether he is indicating to us that it may not prove possible even to honour the second promise and that it looks as if we will be disappointed again?

Huw Merriman: Perhaps I can clarify and try to assist, because I can see the obvious trap I am being invited to fall into. First of all, the Leeds route study has to be published, responses have to be returned, and then a decision has to be made on how and whether it is possible to get HS2 trains to Leeds. That has an impact on Leeds station, which is currently about 115% over capacity. There are also implications for the ability to invest in Leeds station. The whole basis I am trying to lead to is that we have to get the study out and the responses back, and then the decision can be made as to

what occurs. That lends itself to what happens to properties that have come into possession. I hope that orderly process is now clear to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me last week, but I have to say that I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). The chance of the current line running up to Leeds is absolutely non-existent, yet those communities who are currently locked into the line of route are dealing with the wickedness and viciousness of HS2 Ltd, most recently including, as the Minister is aware, 38% rent increases. When will he end this cycle of misery and lift the safeguarding in my constituency?

Huw Merriman: I have the greatest sympathy for my hon. Friend's constituents. They have been ably represented by him, because he has spoken to me on a number of occasions. I have already set out the steps that will be taken with regard to the decision on HS2 trains to Leeds. That will remain the case, but I am already looking into the case for his constituents. A 30% to 38% increase in rents seems like an incredibly high jump in one go. I need to find out the background to that, but he will be meeting me again, so I can give him the detail that he can then give back to his constituents. I will do everything I can to minimise the impact.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I was 45 when the Tory-led Government gave HS2 the go ahead. Since then, as the Minister knows, it has been repeatedly chopped, changed and delayed. I will be 57 next week. How old will I be when it gets to Nottingham?

Mr Speaker: That is a trap.

Huw Merriman: Mr Speaker, it is another trap I do not wish to walk into, beyond saying that with regard to the plans going eastward, which will allow for much faster services to London and Birmingham from Leicester and Nottingham, we will set out more detail both in the response I have to give to the Chairman of the Transport Committee on that aspect of HS2 east and in the parliamentary report. We announced that in the integrated rail plan, which did change matters. It is important that we now give better delivery, so we can indicate timescales and costs.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): My constituents never wanted HS2. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, they have always said that costs would escalate out of control. Sadly, it seems too late to stop its construction in Aylesbury and Wendover, despite the huge damage being done to the beautiful Buckinghamshire countryside. Will the Minister take advantage of the pause he has announced to phase 2 to encourage those at HS2 Ltd and their contractors to devote a little bit more time to helping those impacted by phase 1, to improve mitigation and not constantly have the response "Computer says no."?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend gives me the opportunity to confirm again that we remain on track for the delivery of HS2 between Old Oak Common and Curzon Street. We expect to see trains delivered by 2033. Again, there will be peak disruption for his constituents in Aylesbury, Wendover and the region. I will have a further conversation with the chief executive

[*Huw Merriman*]

and the chairman of HS2 Ltd, and I will absolutely restate the importance of ensuring that, as we are at peak construction period, mitigations are in place. I recognise that there are some in constituencies in the home counties who, notwithstanding the mitigations we have made, think that more could be done. I am happy to represent those calls.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Despite our paying through the nose for HS2, not a single inch of track will be laid in Wales as part of the project. All the while, the UK Government still insist on classifying HS2 as an England and Wales project. Let us be clear: the Welsh Government will fail to receive around £5 billion in Barnett consequential as a result of the project. With the extension up to Scotland already scrapped, is it not about time the Secretary of State admitted that the Government have turned HS2 into an England-only project?

Huw Merriman: As I hope I have outlined, I would be surprised if there was a single constituency, of the 650 represented in this House, that did not have its part to play in terms of business contribution or workforce. I believe it benefits the whole United Kingdom. On Barnett consequential, the situation in Wales is that Network Rail is funded by the Department for Transport for England and Wales. In Scotland, Network Rail is funded by the Scottish Executive, which means that Barnett consequential are paid, so the matters are completely separate.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): If we, as a United Kingdom, cannot build high-speed rail from north to south, what good are we? I remember Lord Adonis coming to the Conservative party and asking for support for the project. Should we not demand greater co-operation from the Opposition Benches, to come together and deliver the project? If we cannot do it, are we doing a good job, as the Victorians did, of building the infrastructure that we need? After all, it is not rocket science, although Robert Stephenson would probably disagree.

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend certainly speaks for me. I want to talk up all those who work on this project. We are building HS2 because it allows us to better connect our cities. For those in parts of the country who feel that they have been underdeveloped, this is the opportunity to level up so that development and business expansion go further north, which is better for the country as a whole. He is right that, as a pioneer of our great railways, it is a tragedy that we do not have a high-speed rail line that connects our country as in European countries. That is why I am proud that we are delivering on HS2. There is a rephrasing of a portion of the line, but the rest is to be built as planned. I will be proud to use it when it is open.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It should not come as a surprise to the Minister that we northern MPs are very sceptical about the promises that he has made today. After all, we were promised high-speed trains from east to west, but all we are getting are high-speed trains from Liverpool to just beyond Manchester, and then trains chugging across the Pennines to Yorkshire.

He promised HS2 in full, yet the Yorkshire leg will not happen and the leg to Crewe is delayed. What guarantees do we have that Manchester and Euston will be delivered on time, as he says? Why should we believe a word he says?

Huw Merriman: If there were no commitment to Manchester, the Bill Committee would have been disbanded, but it continues to go ahead for section 2b, and the indicative timescales remain exactly the same for the Crewe to Manchester piece. Its delivery is crucial to Northern Powerhouse Rail. That is why nothing has changed for 2b. I gently add, having been to see the engineering projects for the trans-Pennine route upgrade, that billions are being spent through the Pennines towards York to fully electrify that line, because that is where the bulk of our investment is geared—to the north and the midlands.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Over the past 40 minutes, the Minister will have realised that one of the big issues is blight. What steps is he taking to ensure that those residents who remain blighted by the original HS2 routes, such as those in my towns of Long Eaton, Sandiacre and Stanton Gate, are fully compensated now that their properties are no longer required for the revised route?

Huw Merriman: The line of route remains the same. There is a two-year rephrasing of the section up towards Crewe, but the line of route remains the same as when it was announced. My hon. Friend is right that many constituents have experienced issues as a result of the impact on HS2. The process in place with HS2 ends up in appeals in the Department for Transport. I look at those individual cases, as does the Secretary of State. In some cases, although those constituents may not be strictly entitled to the cost of moving, we have looked at them and decided that their health impacts necessitate a payment and assistance from the Department. I will continue to work with my hon. Friend and all hon. Members to help their constituents.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Another day, another delay. Does the Minister understand the huge frustration of colleagues across the north of England, who have lived with countless Rail Ministers and iterations of the plan? It is beyond frustrating that the Treasury does not seem to appreciate the huge value that this infrastructure will deliver for the north of England. The Minister will know that I have a particular interest in the high-speed rail study between Sheffield and Leeds, which was announced back in 2021. To be clear, it is not a study; it is just about agreeing the terms of reference to do the subsequent piece of work needed. I ask the Minister again: when does he think that the work on the connectivity between Sheffield and Leeds will be completed?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Member has been persistent in asking those questions, and I have just signed off another written ministerial response to him on that. The answer remains that we intend to publish the options for Leeds soon. As I said at the beginning, that has been cleared by the Department and we will now work with colleagues to get that out there, so that we can get the responses quickly and then make the decisions to allow the options to be delivered.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I welcome the trans-Pennine rail upgrade. I visited Marsden in my patch with Network Rail a couple of weeks ago. There are massive plans to redesign the stations at Marsden and Slaithwaite. However, Yorkshire needs more. We need Northern Powerhouse Rail delivered in full from Liverpool to Hull, via Bradford, and HS2 up to Yorkshire. I will try again on behalf of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis): will the review plan of how to get HS2 trains from Sheffield to Leeds report back before the summer?

Huw Merriman: I fear that I am becoming a stuck record. I said that the document has cleared through the desk of the Department for Transport. The entire Government will hear the House loud and clear on its desire to see that published—I certainly do. On investment across the Pennines, like my hon. Friend, I have seen the extraordinary work that has been done, which will be transformative. We are fully geared to investing. I am happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Minister comes to the Chamber unable to detail HS2 advantages to either north or south Wales. Not a single inch of HS2 track will be laid in Wales, yet it is considered an England and Wales project. That denies Wales any investment in return. The £20 billion already spent on the biggest white elephant in the Tory circus should have resulted in a £1-billion investment in Wales's gutted railways. Will the UK Government therefore guarantee that Wales will receive that £1 billion?

Huw Merriman: I represent the good people of east Sussex, where not a single mile of track is being laid either. HS2 investment will be spread across the UK. I have deliberately used the figure of 29,000 jobs, because those are jobs across the whole UK. Some 2,500 businesses are working on HS2, most of them small or medium-sized. There are vast impacts for those companies and for the economy. I reiterate that, on funding, the Department for Transport funds Network Rail for England and Wales. That is not the case for Scotland, which has its Barnett consequential to fund Network Rail. That is the difference between Wales and Scotland.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): The integrated rail plan 2021 set out the Government's intention for a new Network Rail station in Toton in my constituency. That station is vital for connectivity to the east midlands—the region with the lowest transport spend per head year on year. Will the Minister reaffirm the Government's commitment to a Network Rail station at Toton, and the timescale for completion?

Huw Merriman: As the HS2 east proposals outlined in the integrated rail plan are fleshed out, we will provide more detail, both in response to the Chair of the Transport Committee and ongoing liaison with the Committee, and in the six-monthly report. We remain committed to delivering on the East Midlands Parkway plan, which will improve journey times for Leicester and Nottingham. That remains the same, but the details need to be fleshed out, and I will provide the House with that detail.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister has answered over and over again that the projects will apply solely to England. The last time I checked, Manchester, Crewe and Birmingham were not in Wales. Can the Minister set out the economic benefits for Wales, where no track is being laid? He has given three answers about how Wales's infrastructure for Network Rail is funded. The reality is that we have 11% of the track but 2% of the funding. The Tories are failing Wales and are investing nothing in Welsh rail infrastructure.

Huw Merriman: That is not the case at all. Investment in enhancements on the railway will apply to England and to Wales. The enhancements pipeline to be published in the months to come will address where we can invest with new track in England and in Wales, and I look forward to detailing that. I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine that there are UK-wide benefits from the delivery of HS2. Anybody in any constituency or any part of this House who says that they will get no economic benefits from levelling up the entirety of the UK—I am sorry, but they are not living in the UK.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): By the time phase 2b arrives in the north, if indeed it ever arrives in the north, it will have been nearly 30 years since the project was first signed off. Whether it be HS2, nuclear power, housing or whatever, there is not a single economic competitor who takes so long to deliver strategic infrastructure. If we are serious about economic growth, surely we have to do better.

Huw Merriman: I recognise the frustrations that delays to large infrastructure projects can cause. HS2 phase 2b, for example, is being looked at by a House of Commons Bill Committee; there will then be a House of Lords Bill Committee. There is also the ability to petition. For phase 1, there are many more miles of viaduct and tunnelling than when the programme was first envisaged. That is because of democracy, because of this place and because of the need to mitigate issues for constituents. Although I recognise the frustrations about the delivery of infrastructure projects, I say to my hon. Friend that that is a part of the democratic process, the planning process and the legal process that we have to abide by.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As you well know, Mr Speaker, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II appreciated the importance of railways in nation building and approved the building of the Hejaz railway to connect Istanbul with the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, despite the perilous state of his empire at the time. In failing to deliver on even the most basic vision for HS2, the Government have revealed a preference for leaving Scotland and other parts of their realms poorly connected to the centre. How does the Minister expect my constituents in West Dunbartonshire to feel affinity to a British state that cannot even build a railway in its direction?

Huw Merriman: I reiterate the benefits of HS2 with regard to the United Kingdom as a whole. The hon. Gentleman will be interested in the options for the Golborne link; we will be writing back to the Transport Committee about those options. That, of course, will

[*Huw Merriman*]

assist with our long-term vision to take HS2 trains all the way through the spine of the country, including to Scotland.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Alongside its amendments to HS2, the Department for Transport also slashed active travel budgets last week. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Department has a timetable for decarbonising our transport networks? Does he agree that cutting quick-to-deliver, cheap, healthy active travel budgets may not assist our drive to reduce NHS waiting lists and decarbonise?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is an assiduous champion for the active travel sector, and I have worked with her over the years in that regard. We are still committed to spending £3 billion on active travel schemes over the course of this Parliament. There are £2 billion-worth of additional decarbonisation spends with regard to transport. Our commitment to active travel and to working with Active Travel England remains, and I very much look forward to working with her on how we roll the plans out.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The cost of HS2 has already doubled because of poor management and costly delays. The Minister is claiming that this delay is about saving money: he keeps talking about managing the day-to-day finances. Can he confirm that it is his explicit intention to delay and to pile the cost on a future Government?

Huw Merriman: The rationale behind this is to balance the vast amounts we are spending on HS2 and other transport and infrastructure projects with the priority to grow the economy and reduce debt. I referred earlier to the sheer scale of our borrowing charges that we are having to utilise. It is absolutely right that we look at current spending and at how it can be reduced, while ensuring at the same time that we can still deliver to plan. I reiterate to the House that the only part that is changing in this regard is the rephrasing by two years of the section towards Crewe. I feel that the balance between managing the day-to-day economy right now and investing in the future for our infrastructure charges is the right one.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is clear from the contributions of Members across the House, and indeed from people across the country, that rail has played an important part at the heart of our history as a Union and will play an important part in future. The UK connectivity review highlighted the importance of the north Wales main line not only to the economy of north Wales, but to the interconnectedness of all parts of the Union. Will the Minister please confirm that HS2 is indeed an England and Wales project? Will he also confirm that work on a business case for the electrification of the north Wales main line is continuing and that the delivery plans for its electrification remain part of the Department's plans?

Huw Merriman: We are looking to publish the enhancements pipeline in the months to come. It will detail the future projects off HS2, which will include bids from projects in Wales and in England, not least

the one to which my hon. Friend refers. I also understand that there are champions for a project in south Wales; indeed, I have met hon. Members about it. All those projects will be considered as part of the enhancements pipeline. I reiterate that I see HS2 as a UK-wide project that will benefit the whole United Kingdom, and of course that includes Wales.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am 61. [HON. MEMBERS: "Misleading the House!"] I am not misleading the House. I cannot see, from what we have heard today, that there is any chance of any of these trains chugging into central London in my lifetime—and I am not intending to shuffle off this mortal coil very soon. [*Interruption.*] My political lifetime may be a different matter.

Lots of us in this Chamber like the Minister, although incidentally we think the Secretary of State should be the one to answer this important point. Notwithstanding everything the Minister says, however, my constituents in Wales are paying for this incompetence: £600 million is being spent every month, as he says, and they will not get any benefit whatsoever. If he will come to the Rhondda and explain to people at a public meeting why this is an England and Wales project and they are getting no funding, he can have my support. Otherwise, he can forget it.

Huw Merriman: How could I resist that kind and welcome invitation? When the hon. Gentleman is 71, he will be able to access a train from Old Oak Common to Birmingham. At the interchange station, which I have seen, he will then be able to take the train to central London. It is an extraordinary opportunity: he should go and visit.

I hear the same point from my constituents in East Sussex: they ask, "What's the benefit for me? I don't have any part of the line." I continue to extol the virtues of a UK-wide project that will connect the whole UK, grow the UK's economy and provide jobs and houses for the whole UK. All the UK will benefit from that, regardless of which parts the line of route goes through.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I am disappointed to hear of the further delays. Further to the Minister's answers to the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), the eastern leg of HS2 will massively improve journey times between east and west, for example by cutting the journey from Nottingham to Birmingham down to as little as 28 minutes. Can the Minister give me every reassurance that he will do everything he can to ensure that that leg of HS2 proceeds on schedule as is currently planned?

Huw Merriman: I can. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are great benefits for those around the city of Nottingham and around Derby with regard to the journey time to Birmingham, and indeed further down to London. That was announced as part of the integrated rail plan, and as I have told the House, we will have further details to set out in the parliamentary report that is due. I am very much looking forward to giving him that extra detail.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister baldly states that Euston was always to follow after Old Oak Common, but a previous promise was

that on day one of their operation, high-speed trains would run from central London to Scotland. It is not going to be day one, it is not going to be day 100 and it is not looking like day 1,000 either, so when will HS2 trains run from central London to Scotland? Will the Minister confirm that north of Crewe, the journey time will be slower on high-speed trains than it is the now, on Avanti trains?

Huw Merriman: I think I have already made clear, in answer to an earlier question, that the decision that the first HS2 trains would run from Old Oak Common to Birmingham was made following the Oakervee review; but I do not accept some of the hon. Gentleman's other points. As I have said before, there are long-term ambitions to connect HS2 trains further north than Manchester, but, as things stand, we are planning for Manchester.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May I say, as the Member of Parliament representing the fabled Old Oak Common station, that this is a huge slap in the face for my NW10 residents? They will have to put up with even more years of living on a building site, with the carrot that was dangled before them in the form of the promised fast route to Euston now gone as it becomes the terminus. Given the already rammed tube trains in the area and the fabled Old Oak Common Crossrail station that is supposed to be coming, will the Minister not provide extra funds for TfL to lessen the pain and absorb the overcrowding?

Huw Merriman: We have been giving plenty of funds to TfL in recent years. All I can say to the hon. Lady is that she will be very proud that her constituency has the best-connected and largest new railway station ever built in the UK. I have been there to see it, and I want to thank all those who are working on it: what is being done there is extraordinary. This station will regenerate the hon. Lady's constituency, and I am amazed that she is not welcoming it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): At the same time as the cancellation of the HS2 route to Leeds, the route to Sheffield was cancelled, but we were told not to worry because plenty of other good things were going to happen. The electrification of the midland main line would be unpaused for the third time, and we would get the high-speed trains to Leeds, which we are now told we may know something about at some time in the future. All that has happened since then is the ending of the direct link between Sheffield and Manchester airport. May I return to the first of those promises, and ask the Minister to give a categorical commitment on when the midland main line electrification will be extended to Sheffield?

Huw Merriman: A statement was issued on Thursday. The urgent question relates to HS2, and I have given the commitments in respect of how that will be delivered. As I said earlier, the enhancements pipeline—the HS2 investments—will be forthcoming, and will be put before the House in the coming months. A vast number of projects are in that pipeline, and we will give careful consideration to which ones we will adopt.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Ind): Will the Minister accept the cross-party recommendation of the Welsh Affairs Committee that HS2 should be reclassified as an England-only project, so that Wales can receive the £5 billion in

Barnett consequentials which will allow the Welsh Labour Government to continue to expand public transport services, and people in Wales can receive the same benefits from HS2 as those in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Huw Merriman: Let me reiterate the funding model relating to Network Rail and the way in which we have managed our railways. The funding for England and Wales is provided by the Department for Transport; it is not provided for Scotland, which receives Barnett consequentials so it can fund Network Rail itself. That is the difference between Scotland and Wales.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the longest-serving Labour Member of Parliament, may I say to the Minister that I opposed HS2 from the very beginning, in January 2012, because I thought it was a vanity project and would not benefit my constituents? I wanted investment in the north. HS2 is still, in my view, a vanity project. A hundred billion pounds! Think, Minister, what that could have done in the health service or in our armed forces.

This must be the most incompetent measure introduced by any Government in the last 100 years. Can we have a national day of mourning for it?

Huw Merriman: I recognise that there are differences of opinion. Let me clarify my earlier reference to the Liberal Democrats: I meant that I resent seeing what is said in party by-election literature while the party as a whole supports this project.

I respect the hon. Gentleman's point, as I respect points made on both sides of the House. As I say, opinions differ, but mine is absolutely firm. I believe that this country—the entire United Kingdom—deserves a high-speed train line. I believe that there will be benefits to the economy and to levelling up, with homes and jobs becoming more accessible for the whole of the UK. Of course, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and I look forward to joining the hon. Gentleman when those trains roll and we see the benefits overall.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): HS2 is turning into the predictable generational financial black hole of which many warned at the outset. Scotland and Northern Ireland are protected because they receive full Barnett consequentials, but, as we heard earlier, Wales is given a 0% rating. As a result, our Department for Transport comparability factor currently starts at only 36.6%, which means considerably less money for the Welsh Government to spend on transport. Is not the reality that unless this issue is addressed in one way or another—by devolving the responsibility for funding Network Rail to Wales, if that is what it takes—Welsh transport infrastructure faces decades of further under-investment, and Welsh taxpayers are being thoroughly swindled?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am not sure there was a question there.

Huw Merriman: I think I got the gist, Madam Deputy Speaker. The reality is that the control period will see more than £40 billion spent on renewals across England and Wales, but, as I said earlier, Scotland has to find

[*Huw Merriman*]

that funding for itself, and that is where the Barnett consequential comes in. There are no plans in the foreseeable future to change the manner in which we fund the network in the way that the hon. Gentleman described.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): By its very nature, HS2 is a strategic project from which everyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can gain some benefit. In 2010 it was expected to cost £33 billion, but that is now expected to soar to some £71 billion; meanwhile, there are reports of more delays and persistent congestion in areas such as Camden. Can the Minister reassure me that phase 1 is still on track to be completed by 2029, and that any further delays will be minor and will have no impact on the completion date?

Huw Merriman: As I said at the outset, the intention is to deliver the trains from Old Oak Common to Curzon Street Birmingham by 2033. There is a window between 2029 and 2033, and our commitment to delivering in that timeframe remains.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the situation involving Euston, and I am obviously aware of the disruption that has been caused. I was heartened by a conversation I had with the leader of Camden Borough Council, who talked about the opportunities that that timeframe would afford for us to work together to try to find better solutions that will benefit the whole community, and I am absolutely committed to doing just that. I say to anyone, across the community, who wants to improve the HS2 project, “Get behind this, support it, and help me to sell the merits of HS2.” I think it is a fantastic opportunity—and, if that was the last question, I want to thank everyone who is working on HS2. I have full confidence in them, and I am sure the House does as well.

BBC: Government Role in Impartiality

1.47 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) *Urgent Question*: To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the Government’s role in upholding the impartiality of the BBC.

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): The BBC is a world-class broadcaster, a creative engine and a cultural institution producing some of the best television and radio in the world. The impartiality of the BBC, as a publicly funded broadcaster, goes to the heart of the contract between the corporation and all the licence fee payers whom it serves. That is why the royal charter, which is the constitutional basis of the BBC—along with the underpinning framework agreement—enshrines the need for the BBC to be impartial in both its mission and its public purposes.

The BBC’s mission and public purposes, as set out in the charter, require it to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain, helping people to understand and engage with the world around them. The BBC’s first public purpose is to provide duly accurate and impartial news and information to help people to understand and engage with the world around them. It must also represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom’s nations and regions. Both the charter and the framework agreement also explicitly guarantee the independence of the BBC. As such, the Government have no say in the BBC’s operational or editorial day-to-day decisions or staffing matters, including as they relate to the application of the requirement for impartiality.

The Government stand fully behind the requirements of the royal charter. We are clear that the BBC must truly reflect the nation and guard its impartiality in all of its output. The BBC’s director-general has repeatedly said that the corporation’s impartiality is a priority for him and must be protected. We welcome that the BBC accepted the findings and recommendations of the Serota review and is committed to reform through its 10-point impartiality and editorial standards action plan. It is Ofcom, established by the Government as the independent regulator of the BBC in 2017, that is responsible for holding broadcasters including the BBC to account on the impartiality of their news and current affairs coverage, against the broadcasting code under the Communications Act 2003.

In November last year, Ofcom published its annual review of the BBC. It found the BBC’s impartiality to be a key area of concern among audiences and one where they consistently rate BBC news less favourably for trust and accuracy. Ofcom stated that addressing audience perceptions on this matter is challenging, and the regulator recognises that this is a complex area. It will continue to monitor the performance of the BBC and has urged the BBC not to lose momentum in its efforts to address this issue. It remains a priority for the Government to ensure that Ofcom delivers an effective and proportionate regulatory framework that holds the BBC to account while maintaining its creative freedom and operational independence.

In May 2022, the Government launched the mid-term review. This is a new mechanism established by the current charter, focusing on the governance and regulatory arrangements for the BBC, given the reforms that were introduced when the charter was granted. One area of focus in the MTR is impartiality, and it will assess the efficacy of the governance mechanisms and Ofcom's regulation in ensuring that the BBC meets the high standards that licence fee payers expect of it. It is also an important milestone in our road map for BBC reform, and work is well under way. The charter specifies that the review must take place between 2022 and 2024, and we will publish our findings and conclusions in due course.

The BBC is respected globally. It reaches hundreds of millions of people across the world every week. No other country in the world has anything quite like it. We have been clear that the BBC must place a firm emphasis on accuracy, impartiality and diversity of opinion. It can never be the BBC's role to judge, or appear to judge, the diverse values of the people from across the country it serves. In the era of fake news, public service broadcasting and a free press have never been more important, and the BBC has been and should be a beacon that sets standards to which others can aspire.

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

Lucy Powell: This week's whole sorry saga has raised serious questions about the Government's role in upholding BBC impartiality. They have their fingerprints all over it. It is no wonder the Secretary of State has gone AWOL. First, it exposed how susceptible the BBC leadership is to Government pressure. After days of holding off, the BBC capitulated to a Tory cancel campaign, orchestrated by Ministers and Conservative Members with their friends in the press, and took Mr Lineker off air. These are the same voices, by the way, who claim to be the champions of free speech. What changed? Can the Minister tell us what contact she or any member of the Government had with any BBC executives or board members during this time? What does she think it looks like to the outside world when a much-loved sports presenter is taken off air for tweeting something that the Government do not like? It sounds more like Putin's Russia to me.

Secondly, the Government have seriously damaged the BBC's reputation by appointing a chair who is embroiled in the personal finances of the Prime Minister who gave him the job. No doubt the Minister will tell the House that that is under investigation, but it is an investigation that I instigated, not her. Her boss is the only person with any power to fire the BBC chair. Does she agree that he is now completely unable to carry out his role of providing confidence, credibility and independence? What is she doing to put this right?

Finally, the Government have pursued a deliberate strategy of undermining the BBC in order to keep it over a barrel to get themselves more favourable coverage. That was on full display overnight and I am sure it will be on full display here today. They threaten the licence fee, cut the BBC's funding and undermine its credibility, all in pursuit of keeping their foot on the BBC's throat. Will the Minister today finally call off the dogs behind her and stand up for the BBC's independence from the Government?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her spirited questions. I have watched her valiant attempts to kick this political football across the weekend and into this week. As *Politico* notes, we are now on Lineker day 8. She shouts about a political campaign to undermine the BBC that is akin to Putin's Russia. She professes that she is the shield trying to protect the BBC from political interference, but all the while demanding that the PM gets more stuck in and telling the BBC that it is in the wrong. Forgive the bewildered licence fee payer for wondering why W1A and SW1A are still focusing on this individual case—one that the Government have consistently made clear is for the BBC to resolve internally, which we note it has now done.

As the hon. Lady knows full well from the Secretary of State's reply to her correspondence over the weekend, our Department regularly engages with the BBC on a range of issues. At no time have any of us as Ministers sought to influence the BBC's decision on this case in any way. The events of last week are rightly a matter for the corporation's determination, and we as a Government do not seek to interfere. I have not added, and do not intend to add, my views on this specific case in response to this urgent question. In response to assertions yesterday that he bowed to political pressure from the Government, the BBC director-general, Tim Davie, said:

"That is a convenient narrative. It's not true."

The hon. Lady has sought to make the BBC chairman, Richard Sharp, the ultimate arbiter of such matters. In fact, the BBC charter is clear that it is the director-general, as editor-in-chief of the BBC, not the chairman of the board, who has final responsibility for individual decisions on the BBC's editorial matters. On the issue of Mr Sharp, she will be aware that previous Governments have appointed people to senior positions in the BBC who have declared political activity. That is not prohibited under the rules. Once appointed, however, all board members are required to adhere to the code of conduct for public body board members. She will know that there are separate independent inquiries into Mr Sharp's appointment process, and they must be left to conclude. When it comes to the timetable of that, the Government are also awaiting the outcome, and it is right for the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the investigator that it has appointed to determine the timetable for that process, not the Government.

The hon. Lady said that the Tory Government had long wanted to undermine the BBC. Not true. This is an organisation with a near-guaranteed licence fee income of £3.8 billion per annum until the next charter review in 2027. We back the BBC. We want it to survive as a thriving cultural, creative and democratic engine for many years to come. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office announced just this week that it is giving an extra £20 million to support the BBC World Service over two years, building on the additional support that we gave it for its Ukraine and Russia reporting operations.

The social compact that underpins the BBC's funding arrangement depends fundamentally on the broadcaster maintaining the trust and confidence of viewers. The BBC's currency in a world of misinformation and "shout the loudest" public discourse is truth, impartiality, accuracy and editorial integrity. It remains our priority as a Government to work with the regulator, Ofcom, to deliver an effective and proportionate framework that

[Julia Lopez]

holds the BBC to account in its duties, including to impartiality. In May 2020 we launched the mid-term review, a key focus of which was impartiality, and we will assess Ofcom's regulation in ensuring that the BBC meets the high standards that licence fee payers expect of it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the acting Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Last weekend was embarrassingly terrible for the BBC, and anyone who cares about the future of the BBC will want this furore to die down and to move on as fast as possible. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the responsibility of the BBC management to produce a set of clear and enforceable guidelines on the behaviour of presenters, whether freelance or staff? Does she also agree that, in return, presenters whose reputations and bank balances are enhanced by regular appearances on popular BBC shows also owe a reciprocal responsibility to the BBC, which may include some self-restraint in what they say and do in public?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important question. I agree that anybody who cares about the BBC will want this furore to die down so that it can focus on how to ensure that it operates to the terms that create confidence in the public. He asked about the BBC guidelines, and I agree that they are fundamentally important to how the BBC organises its staffing. One of the key recommendations of the Serota review was that the guidelines on how presenters operate are fundamental and should be applied no matter the seniority, profile or role of the employee. This is something that must be revisited by the BBC as an organisation in the light of this furore.

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

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): On Saturday, BBC bosses said that Gary Lineker would have to apologise before being allowed back on the air. Yesterday, the BBC director-general apologised to Gary Lineker, who will now go back on the air without compromising. What a mess. A humiliating retreat for BBC bosses.

Normally, the BBC chair would hit the airwaves to steady nerves but, of course, the chair is Richard Sharp, a Tory donor who facilitated an £800,000 loan to the Prime Minister who then appointed him. Mr Sharp appears to be in hiding. I know many Conservative Members loathe the BBC and public service broadcasting, but does the Minister agree that her Conservative colleagues have overplayed their hand by trying to influence BBC decision making? Moreover, does she agree that we need a new system for plum public service appointments, with no more party donors, either Tory or Labour, appointed in future?

Julia Lopez: I make it clear that Ministers have not sought to intervene or interfere in how this process has been handled by the BBC. I will not be commenting on the Lineker case specifically, because I want to maintain

the independence of the BBC and the ability of the director-general to make decisions based on how he wishes to organise his institution.

On Mr Sharp, as I said to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the BBC charter makes it clear that the director-general, as editor-in-chief of the BBC—and not the chairman of the board—has final responsibility for issues such as the ones we saw over the weekend.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Mindful that the Minister does not want to comment on self-indulgent, out-of-touch, insensitive, avaricious, smug, arrogant football pundits, and in mind, too, of the BBC's important role as a national institution, made special by both its charter and the mode of its funding, will she affirm that impartiality is critical to the BBC's continuing role? The BBC is respected throughout the world for its impartiality—the World Service springs to mind. When that impartiality is compromised by anyone in a privileged position, that flaw undermines the BBC we want to support.

Julia Lopez: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is the mode of the BBC's funding that makes it different in how it must respond to such cases. Trust and impartiality are fundamental to the social compact that underpins the licence fee. If that trust and impartiality are seen to be broken by people in the organisation, it is for the organisation to take that into account and to take action accordingly.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Minister says Ministers are not getting involved, but the Leader of the House, reading from a prepared script at business questions last Thursday, said:

"Labour is borrowing from the Gary Lineker playbook... This country does not need goal-hangers; it needs centre-forwards."—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 413.]

That perhaps shows her slight lack of understanding of football, but is not the key point that these guidelines were changed in 2020 specifically because Conservative Members were trying to nobble Gary Lineker? That is why it has been such a disaster this weekend.

Julia Lopez: The Leader of the House is entitled to comment on the nature of Mr Lineker's comments but, as far as I am aware, she applied zero pressure on the BBC to take action in relation to his contract.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I hope the shadow Secretary of State will reflect on her comparison of this Government to the Putin regime, which is of course engaged in war crimes and the murder of men, women and children in Ukraine. That was beneath her.

I am perfectly content with the BBC's funding model and output, but one element of Mr Lineker's statement on Twitter is completely unacceptable. I grew up surrounded by people who had their lives turned on their head by the Nazi regime in Germany, so I hope the Minister will comment on Mr Lineker's references to 1930s Germany. He can say what he likes about the Illegal Migration Bill, but he should have the decency to apologise for comparing any action of a democratically elected Government in this country to 1930s Germany. It was disgusting.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for setting out how he feels about the comments that were made. I very much appreciate the deep sensitivities of this matter. I also think it was distasteful to compare the Government's actions, or otherwise, to the Putin regime. That is a disgraceful comparison to make and I think it is way off the mark.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The BBC's decision to take Gary Lineker off the air for his criticism of the Government's immoral, inhumane and unworkable Illegal Migration Bill justifiably angered both the public and the professional staff working for the corporation, many of whom are in my constituency. Sadly, confidence in BBC management was already at a real low following revelations about the circumstances of Richard Sharp's appointment as chairman. This week, members of the National Union of Journalists across the BBC in England will be taking strike action in defence of our local radio services. Does the Minister agree that the issues with the BBC are much more fundamental than just how presenters use social media? Will she join me in calling on Richard Sharp to resign so that trust in BBC impartiality can be restored?

Julia Lopez: The hon. Lady talks of BBC staff in her constituency. They signed contracts and are aware of the standards to which they must adhere, because impartiality is so fundamental to the organisation, its future success and the trust in which the public hold it. As an organisation, the BBC strives to adhere to those principles, so I suspect there is a conversation happening between staff at every level as to whether consistent standards are being applied to the professional terms to which they all signed up.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The way in which the BBC has reacted over the last week or so has been nothing short of appalling. Does the Minister agree that the BBC needs to set clear rules, rather than guidance, on what is expected from its presenters, particularly high-profile presenters—erring on the side of caution rather than encouraging political commentary—and that the BBC should not be pushed around by privileged and overpaid elites?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. The Serota review was designed to do just that: to make sure there are very clear guidelines to which BBC employees sign up, and to make sure people undertake impartiality training when they take on roles within the BBC. The Serota review also talks about the importance of making sure those standards apply no matter a person's seniority, profile or role. There are questions for the BBC to answer on the application of those standards in this case.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The only disaster this weekend has been for the BBC, given the despicable way in which it handled the Gary Lineker affair and then caved in to this man and his friends who rallied around him. Does the Minister agree that the BBC has shown once again that, because of its inherent bias, it is impossible for it to be impartial? It is now time we no longer forced people to finance the BBC through the licence fee, especially when the BBC takes 1,000 people a week, 70% of them women, to court for refusing to pay this poll tax on propaganda.

Julia Lopez: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of impartiality to the trust in which licence fee payers hold the organisation, and its importance to the future of the licence fee, not least because fewer people are now paying the licence fee—we are concerned the public are losing support for the licence fee. Fundamentally, the way in which people consume television is changing very rapidly, and we need to make sure the BBC has a sustainable future.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I support the right to free speech and the BBC's public service broadcasting principles. I think we need a public service broadcaster, and I support a licence fee to pay for it, but full impartiality is required for a public service broadcaster to be trusted. Whatever people say about Gary Lineker's comments, whether they are right or wrong, they cannot argue that his comments are not political, as yesterday's debate showed. Does my hon. Friend agree the BBC needs to ensure that it has strict rules in place on impartiality, and that it applies those rules evenly? If a person works for the BBC, whether as an employee or as a contractor, they should have to follow the same rules.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of impartiality. The BBC already has a set of rules on that but, in the light of this incident, it is also looking at how social media is governed and making sure that the organisation is adhering to those principles and that the guidance is working as it should.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Whatever review is undertaken now, Richard Sharp is currently the chair of the BBC. The specifications say that one of his responsibilities is the "delivery of impartiality" at the corporation. Does the Minister have any confidence that, in his current situation, Richard Sharp can properly undertake that role?

Julia Lopez: Richard Sharp was appointed in a transparent way. There are obviously concerns about—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There is a bit too much shouting as soon as the Minister or others say anything. Can we just listen to the answers?

Julia Lopez: From my Department's perspective, the appointment was undertaken to the letter. There have since been events that have come to light that we need to investigate, and those things are being investigated. On Mr Sharp's ability to do the role, as I have mentioned, it is possible to hold political views and be appointed to that role. That has been the case over many years and across different flavours of Government. The question is whether that person carries out their role in an apolitical and impartial way, and I believe there is currently a BBC review as to whether those duties are being carried out in that way.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Impartiality is public purpose No. 1 of the royal charter, which I helped to negotiate in 2016. Given that guidelines simply do not work, may I suggest the setting up of an independent adjudicating body for impartiality, alongside Ofcom, given that the BBC receives £5 billion a year, largely

[Sir William Cash]

through the licence taxpayer, and that last year out of the 430,000 complaints made to the BBC only 325 were dealt with and only 14 fully upheld?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for not only his question, but the way in which he has engaged with me over the mid-term review. I know he has a number of ideas as to how the governance and regulations of the BBC need to be changed. I look forward to engaging with him further on the mid-term review. He is right that it is looking at the complaints system, but also at editorial standards and impartiality, and I hope that we can continue to engage on these matters.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The BBC has some brilliant journalists and staff, who work hard to make it the world's leading public service broadcaster, but the decision to remove Gary Lineker from the air at the weekend just demonstrates its fear of this Government; it bowed to their pressure. However, the real focus should be on the BBC chair, who is a Tory donor, arranged for a loan for the former Prime Minister and is a friend of the current Prime Minister. Surely he has eroded trust and confidence in the BBC. Could the Minister say whether she agrees and whether his position is tenable?

Julia Lopez: I believe I have already answered that question, but I reiterate that no pressure was applied on the BBC by Ministers and that having political links to a party does not preclude someone from taking on a role within the BBC—it is about how they dispense their obligations within that role.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What role do the Government have in ensuring that the BBC delivers for the audiences it serves? Will the Minister join me please in pressing the BBC to look again at its shocking decision to close the 99-year-old choir, the BBC Singers?

Julia Lopez: On some of the musical operations the BBC currently funds, I know that this matter is causing a lot of alarm and concern. As my hon. Friend will appreciate, it is not for me to set out to the BBC how it should spend licence fee payers' money, but it does have certain duties upon it to deliver cultural good. The matter of the BBC Singers is still open to staff consultation and I encourage staff who are concerned about these changes to fully engage with that consultation.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I trust, or I hope, that I am seen to be fair-minded in this place. First, the Minister has said that she will not instruct Richard Sharp to go, but does she accept that his continuation, his lingering on, as chair does nothing for the reputation of the BBC, and that he should reflect on his position and consider accordingly? Secondly, although she claims that the process of his appointment was transparent, many of us in this place, including many Conservative Members, feel that it was very far from that indeed and should be looked into.

Julia Lopez: The process, from a DCMS perspective, was fully transparent. We followed the process to the letter and that process was subsequently approved in a hearing by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture,

Media and Sport. Things have subsequently come to light that are under investigation, and I am afraid that I cannot comment on that investigation.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I understand that an independent expert has been appointed by the BBC to review social media guidance, particularly in relation to freelancers. Does the Minister agree that it is important that those who are paid vast sums by the taxpayer and are widely perceived to be BBC presenters do not avoid paying taxes and disregard impartiality guidelines by hiding behind freelancer status? Does she also agree that until that review is completed, somebody such as Gary Lineker must continue to follow the existing guidelines, which means refraining from politics? Monitoring of his social media account over the past 24 hours, as he retweets *The New European* and Alastair Campbell, would make interesting reading.

Julia Lopez: It is incredibly important that the BBC is left to conduct its social media review in a way that allows it to bring clarity, particularly on this question of freelancers versus people who are paid employees. As the highest paid employee, Mr Lineker will, understandably, be held to account for his views by the licence fee payer, and that is difficult to ignore as an issue relevant to whether the BBC is impartial.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The BBC prepared a statement to be read out on "Question Time" last week in the event that the assault by Stanley Johnson on his wife was raised by one of the panellists. That statement said that Stanley Johnson had not commented but that a friend had said that the incident did take place "but it was a one-off".

The BBC had time to consider that statement; it was a pre-prepared statement put in front of the chair of the panel. What on earth was in their heads when they agreed that? Who benefited most from it—was it the Conservative party or those women who have suffered domestic violence?

Julia Lopez: Without knowing the full details of the statement—[*Interruption.*] I am afraid that I do not know the statement to which the hon. Gentleman refers. The only commentary I have seen on this matter was on whether Fiona Bruce had behaved professionally, which, from my reading of the situation, she had.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On duties of impartiality, it is important that BBC presenters, who have such a wide audience, make statements that are correct. Whatever people's views on Gary Lineker, he did, in a tweet last December, in effect praise a Hamas terrorist who had been involved in the murder of two Jewish pilgrims to a tomb. He did not apologise when that was pointed out and he still has not done so. The key point here is: they can say what they like, as long as they get it right, and if they are wrong, they should apologise.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I was not aware of that case, but some of these questions will, we hope, be resolved by the social media review that the BBC is undertaking. We hope they will give clarity about the rules to which its presenters must adhere.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The BBC chairman, Richard Sharp, donated £400,000 to the Conservatives and helped the former Prime Minister on an £800,000 loan. The BBC director-general, Tim Davie, is a former Conservative candidate, and the BBC board includes Robbie Gibb, a former aide to a Conservative Prime Minister. The BBC has allowed presenters such as Jeremy Clarkson to say that he wanted to shoot striking workers, Andrew Neil to be chairman of the Conservative magazine *The Spectator* and Alan Sugar to encourage people to vote for the Conservatives, but it has not allowed Gary Lineker to criticise inhumane Conservative policy. Is it not time for not only the resignations of the BBC chairman and director-general, but BBC reform, with the Government no longer appointing its leadership?

Julia Lopez: I simply repeat that, as the hon. Lady will be aware, previous Governments have appointed to senior positions in the BBC people who have declared political activity. That does not preclude a person taking a position; it is not prohibited under the rules. Once appointed, all board members are required to adhere to the code of conduct, and as far as I am aware, Mr Sharp has done so.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): When working as a BBC journalist in the south-west, I was acutely aware of the rules on the use of social media and I saw swift action being taken by BBC management when others forgot their duty of impartiality. These rules are critically important for a broadcaster that relies on the licence fee, and they must be crystal clear for everyone. Does my hon. Friend agree that the BBC must now be given space to conduct its review of social media guidelines?

Julia Lopez: I agree that the BBC should be given space to carry out the review and to set out clear guidelines. The Serota review made it crystal clear that seniority, profile or role do not exempt anyone from having the rules applied to them, and I think that is something that needs to be teased out in this review.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The behaviour of the Tories in the past week has been shameful and reprehensible. In fact, they remind me of the black-headed gulls harassing that puffin in David Attenborough's "Wild Isles", but it is just not working. Fifty per cent. of Britons have a positive view of Gary Lineker compared with 30% who do not, whereas only 25% of UK voters would vote for the Conservative party if there was an election tomorrow. I know the Minister will never become the host of "Match of the Day"—nor will any of her Back-Bench colleagues—but who does she think would win if Gary Lineker went head to head with her in an election tomorrow?

Julia Lopez: I think I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I am not entirely sure what his point was. I have no response beyond saying that there was no attempt to interfere politically with the way in which Gary Lineker's case was handled.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I worked for the BBC for seven years, both as a member of staff and as a freelancer. Impartiality was absolutely core to me professionally and personally. Nobody knew how I voted

or what I thought politically. I accept that that was before the era of social media, but what that means is that impartiality is even more needed now because fake news is rife in our society. People do not just get their opinions from what they see on the news; they form their judgments and knowledge based on a wide variety of people and personalities. That means that this is a very significant issue. Having said all that, does my hon. Friend agree that ensuring and guaranteeing impartiality must be the responsibility of the broadcasters themselves, and that it is incumbent on BBC senior management now to resolve this case as quickly as they can and to make sure that BBC guidelines are fit for purpose and for the era in which we all live?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his commentary, especially given his experience as a former BBC employee. His contributions in this regard are always valuable. He is absolutely right: impartiality is core to the purpose of the BBC and fundamental to the trust in which it is held; it underpins the social compact on which the licence fee rests. I am sure that that is fundamentally respected by the vast majority of BBC staff, many of whom will be asking why the rules that apply to them are not always applied consistently to everyone in the organisation.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): British broadcasting is the best in the world. Considering we are a relatively small country, we do phenomenally well in managing to sell our product to the rest of the world. Broadcasting is a mixed economy, and to me, having the BBC funded by licence fee payers, providing something for everybody because it is paid for by everybody, is absolutely essential to ensuring that we maintain that pre-eminence in the world.

Yes, trust is at the heart of it. I too used to work for the BBC. I worked quite closely with a former Conservative chairman of the BBC, Sir Christopher Bland. A very fine man, he would never have allowed this moment to arrive, because he would have known that if he had expressed any political opinions personally, it would have undermined the position of the BBC; and if he had failed to reveal something about his relationship to the Government when he was appointed by a Conservative Government, that would have undermined the BBC. I am absolutely sure that if Sir Christopher Bland had been in the situation that Richard Sharp is in today, he would have resigned by now, because he knew that the BBC was more important than him.

My real worry is that I understand that the Prime Minister has now said that he wants the review into Richard Sharp's appointment, which the Minister has referred to several times today, to be kicked into the long grass. That is my understanding. Can the Minister tell us when the review will come to a conclusion? At the moment, Richard Sharp remaining at the BBC is bringing the whole of the BBC into disrepute.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing his experience as a former BBC employee. He is absolutely right that in a world of fake news, trust is the BBC's currency, and one that we should protect. As I mentioned, the FCDO has given additional funding for some of the BBC's important operations around the world. He is also right to say that people should leave their political

[Julia Lopez]

opinions at the door when they seek to engage. As far as I am aware, Mr Sharp has not sought to be a politically active person on the board, but as I said, having political opinions and involvement do not preclude an individual being appointed to the board. The hon. Gentleman talks about the Prime Minister trying to delay the process. That is not true. The process is not in the gift of the Prime Minister. We await the timetable as the hon. Gentleman does.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The self-inflicted chaos of the last few days and the BBC's apparent unwillingness to enforce its own impartiality rules have made it a laughing stock. It is clear that it is now overpaid sports presenters, rather than executives, who are truly calling the shots. Many of my constituents have long regarded the BBC licence fee as a regressive, decades-old and out-of-date tax. Is it not time that we had a grown-up conversation about its future?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend raises questions about the future of the licence fee. We will examine these questions in advance of the next charter, in 2027. As I mentioned, it is not just a question whether the licence fee still has support; it is a question whether it is sustainable, as the way we watch media changes fundamentally. We need to make sure the BBC can keep up and maintain the consent of those who watch its services.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): For several months, many Putney journalist residents have been contacting me about the erosion of the BBC's impartiality by of the merger of BBC World News and BBC News, which is being soft-launched this month. It will be mainly a world news channel, cutting UK news and Government scrutiny by over 80 hours a week. Is this a commercial decision or a political one? Will the Minister say whether there has been indirect or direct pressure on the BBC to reduce its BBC UK news coverage?

Julia Lopez: The notion that the Government have instructed the BBC to reduce its news content is pretty wide of the mark. How the BBC organises its services is a matter for the BBC. What we care about is that services are delivered impartially and to a very high quality. As I say, it is not for us to determine.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I have to say, I did not see the revolution starting with Gary Lineker and "Match of the Day", but I am absolutely here for it. Major respect to Gary Lineker and those at the BBC who have stood up to what most of us, including the dogs on the street, can see is a grossly inhuman policy that shames us all. Does the Minister agree that it is rank hypocrisy to have a go at Gary Lineker when we have BBC broadcasters like Tam Cowan, who put out a reel of women injuring themselves on International Women's Day, going unchecked? There is clearly no level playing field.

Julia Lopez: Whether there is a level playing field between different employees of the BBC is a matter for the BBC to determine.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The BBC is losing connection with the licence fee payer because the Government chose to compromise its independence with the appointment of Richard Sharp, but on the Minister's watch they have also slashed the BBC World Service and halved BBC local radio, forcing staff out on strike tomorrow. In addition, over the weekend we saw a surreal situation and chaos over sport being taken off air just because someone dared to speak truth to power. What steps will she take to ensure that the public's priorities are restored at the BBC and that freedom of speech is never dumbed down?

Julia Lopez: I have to challenge the hon. Lady: we have not slashed services at the BBC. The BBC has a guaranteed income over the next few years of £3.8 billion a year. She seems to be suggesting that we should have had a different financial settlement for the BBC at a time of tremendous financial pressure on households. We were not willing to do that.

Building Safety

2.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the progress the Government have made in securing commitments from developers to remediate properties with building safety defects. Last year, the major house builders signed a pledge to fix all the medium or high-rise buildings that they had built or refurbished that were unsafe. The developers also promised to reimburse the taxpayer for work already undertaken at Government expense.

This Parliament has always been clear that those with ultimate responsibility for those buildings should bear the cost of remediation. Innocent leaseholders, who are neither responsible for safety defects nor equipped with the resources to fix the problem, should not be on the hook. Those who are responsible must pay. We have worked with developers to draw up a contract that gives direct effect to the pledge that they made. I was and remain grateful to those developers who have been so keen to live up to those obligations, and I am particularly grateful to Stewart Baseley of the Home Builders Federation for his skilful work in supporting the commitments made.

We published the legal contract on 30 January this year, and I gave an initial cohort of developers six weeks to confirm that they accepted the list of buildings for which they take responsibility and then to sign the contract. That deadline expired yesterday. I can confirm that 39 developers have signed the contract. We have published a list of those developers on gov.uk and hard copies of the list have been shared with the Vote Office. By signing the contracts, those developers have committed to fixing at least 1,100 buildings. They will invest more than £2 billion in that work—money saved for the taxpayer and invested in giving leaseholders a brighter future. I thank those developers for their hard work and co-operation in helping us to right the wrongs of the past. They are making significant financial commitments and I am grateful to them.

Leaseholders who have been waiting for work to be done to make their building safe will quite rightly want that work to start without delay. I know that those responsible developers who have signed the contract understand that expectation and will be in touch with leaseholders to set out the programme of expected works as soon as possible. I take the opportunity once again to apologise to those leaseholders and others who have waited so long for this work to be done. While there is still much to do, I hope today shows that their campaigning and that of so many hon. Members has not been in vain. While the overwhelming majority of major developers have signed, some regrettably have not. Parliament has made clear what that means, and so have I. Those companies will be out of the house building business in England entirely unless and until they change their course. Next week I will publish key features of our new responsible actors scheme, a means of ensuring that only those committed to building safety will be allowed to build in future.

Those developers who have been invited to sign the remediation contract, but who have not agreed to live up to their responsibilities, will not be eligible to join the

responsible actors scheme. They will not be able to commence new developments in England or receive building control approval for work already under way. The House should note that the companies invited to sign the remediation contract who have not yet lived up to their responsibilities are Abbey Developments, Avant, Ballymore, Dandara, Emerson Group (Jones Homes), Galliard Homes, Inland Homes, Lendlease, London Square, Rydon Homes and Telford Homes.

While my officials remain in discussions with several who are making progress towards signing, I am concerned that some companies do not appreciate the grave nature of the responsibility they bear. I hope the directors of those firms will now exercise the same level of responsibility as the leaders of the building industry. The reluctance so far of some companies to sign up only underlines the need for the responsible actors scheme. It will ensure that there are consequences for developers who wish to be, at the moment, neither answerable nor accountable.

I will take other steps to ensure that companies live up to their responsibilities. I will be writing to major investors in those firms to explain the commercial implications of their directors' current decisions. I will write to local authorities and building inspectors to explain that those developers' projects may not be started or signed off. I will notify public bodies to be prepared to reopen tender award processes or rerun competitions. House buyers will want to know what that means for them, and we will formally set out the risks involved in purchasing homes from companies that have chosen to ignore the prospect of prohibitions.

I accept that the course of action that I have set out today is a significant intervention in the market for any Government, but the magnitude of the crisis that we faced and the depth of the suffering for all those affected clearly justified a radical approach. To their credit, the leaders of the development industry have willingly accepted the need for action. The vast majority of developers, as we should all appreciate, have made undertakings to the British public to put right the wrongs of the past. I am glad we can now work together with leaders in the industry on making sure that we deliver more safe, affordable, decent homes for the country.

As those developers have rightly argued, we in Government will also do more to pursue freeholders who have yet to live up to their responsibilities and construction product manufacturers, who also bear heavy responsibility for unsafe buildings. I will have more to say on that in the days and weeks to come. For the many thousands of people whose lives have been blighted by the failure properly to address building safety in the past, today's update brings us one more step closer to at last resolving the issue, and for that reason I commend the statement to the House.

2.36 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. We want to see every developer sign the remediation contract and urgently move to fix the unsafe buildings and free leaseholders who have been trapped for too long. Throughout this process, we have supported steps to speed that up and provide support to leaseholders. In that spirit, I welcome the statement and I do not doubt the Secretary of State's sincerity in dealing with this problem, nor the deeply held convictions on all sides of the House.

[Lisa Nandy]

However, I fear that the collective will of this House to see that done is being damaged by what appears to be an increasingly dysfunctional approach from the Government. Last week the Secretary of State was on social media threatening major house builders with a nationwide ban if they failed to sign up to the contract within a matter of days. He is 100% right to say the developers should pay, but it undermines his case when his own Department had not even managed to send the contract to them.

That really matters, because until builders sign, leaseholder groups remain in limbo. They need more than tough talk; they need clarity and competence. For the 10 developers who signed the initial pledge but not the contract, which as the Secretary of State rightly says includes Galliard Homes, Ballymore and—shamefully, given its role in Grenfell—Rydon Homes, will he be using the powers at his disposal to designate the developers who cannot be granted planning permission? Crucially, can he tell us from when?

The Secretary of State is right to say this is a step forward, but there are many more steps to go. Leaseholders need not another deadline, but real action and hope on the horizon. Can he spell out exactly what this action will mean for developments that have already begun under those developers and that have already received planning consent? Will he be using the powers at his disposal to issue remediation orders to force them to fix their buildings in the meantime? Can he also tell us whether the 39 who have signed the contract will be obliged to fix all critical fire safety defects, as defined by the Building Safety Act 2022, and what will happen if they do not? There is a gap between the contract and the Act, and we need to make sure that the cost of that gap is not borne by leaseholders.

The contract, the Secretary of State says, will cover over 1,000 buildings. Given that his own Department has estimated that there are between 6,000 and 9,000 unsafe 11 to 18-metre buildings alone, it clearly only deals with a fraction of the problem. How does he plan to assist leaseholders in buildings with defects that are outside the scope of the contract in getting them remediated? Remediation remains painfully slow—something he knows and has rightly acknowledged—but the contract stipulates only that repairs and remediation must be carried out “as soon as reasonably practicable”.

Again, I push him for hard timescales and deadlines.

On the issue of who is responsible, may I again ask the Secretary of State why British house builders are being asked to pay, while foreign developers and the companies that made the materials used in affected buildings are still not? That is a basic question of justice.

We should all be moving heaven and earth to right this wrong, yet the House of Lords Committee that scrutinised amendments to the Building Safety (Leaseholder Protections) (England) Regulations 2022 found that that instrument contained an unintentional drafting error that excluded parent and sister companies from being considered as associated with the landlord. That meant that landlords could avoid the £2 million net worth threshold above which they must not pass on to leaseholders costs for repairing historical defects. Despite that error as a result of a mistake at the Secretary of State's Department, no compensation has been forthcoming

for leaseholders who have had to pay remediation costs, and no plans are in place to alert those leaseholders to the possibility of applying to a tribunal to seek cost recovery. What is the Department doing to identify affected leaseholders and inform them that an appeal route to recover costs is available to them?

Finally, I say to the Secretary of State that there is, I think, cross-party agreement now that this is not the only issue for leaseholders. Leasehold is a feudal system that has no place in a modern society. It is time that we ended—abolished—the scandal of leasehold once and for all, and ended the misery for the far too many people who are trapped in that feudal system. Labour appreciates what he has done to move this desperate situation forward, but it remains in his gift to fix it once and for all, and we would fail in our duty if we did not take every opportunity to urge him to do so.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the thoughtful and detailed way in which she has responded to the announcement, and for the support from her and colleagues across the House for the work that we have undertaken.

The hon. Lady asks about contracts and the speed with which they have been signed. Again, just to inform her and the House, we ensured that developers were given a copy of the contract on 30 January, when it was published. A final version was sent to developers with minor alterations on 21 February. The execution version of the contract depended on the developers themselves providing the Department with a list of affected buildings, so it was the work of developers, not of the Department, that led to the late signing of contracts, but I am grateful to all who have now signed.

The hon. Lady asks about the responsible actors scheme, when it will be implemented and the effect it will have. We will lay details of the responsible actors scheme next week. I want to allow some of the 11 who have not yet signed a little leeway to ensure that they live up to their responsibilities. The letters that I have written to the directors of the companies concerned will, I think, help to concentrate their minds to ensure that they have a chance to sign before we lay the responsible actors scheme details next week.

The hon. Lady asks if the powers in the 2022 Act will be used for those who will not have signed by that time. They absolutely will. She asks if we will fix all critical features. All life-critical features in medium and high-rise buildings will be addressed by developers. It is the case that with buildings under 11 metres, there are some fire safety issues, but we have to look at them case by case—some will be life-critical; some will not. Our cladding safety scheme, which addresses mid-rise buildings specifically—those between 11 and 18 metres—should, I hope, deal with the delay, which she rightly points out, in dealing with the fire safety issue for that crucial section of our housing sector.

The hon. Lady makes the point about foreign developers and the need to tackle them, and I quite agree with her. It is important that we use all the tools in our power, and we are exploring sanctions, criminal options and others. The one thing that I would say is that there is one jurisdiction—not a foreign jurisdiction but an adjacent one—where action has not been taken to deal with some of those responsible, and that, of course, is Wales. I ask her to work with me to ensure that the Welsh

Labour Government take appropriate steps to deal with the situation in Wales. We stand ready to work with them and with all parties in that regard.

The hon. Lady also asks about the need to abolish the invidious and feudal system of leasehold. As someone who was born in Scotland—mercifully, a country free from that system—I can say only that this is one area where I hope that England at last catches up with one part of the United Kingdom that is, in that respect at least, more progressive.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I declare an interest in having a leasehold property—although I have no problems with it—and I also have minor shares in some building companies so that I can get at their boards when necessary.

I thank the Secretary of State for his continuing work. May I reinforce a question asked from the Labour Front Bench: how many buildings beyond the 1,100 still need a way forward? Can we agree that leaseholders and others want to know that their own homes are safe and saleable? We know that the task is to find the problems, fix them and pay for them.

I put it to the Secretary of State that the one group that seems to be left out of this is that of the insurance companies who covered the developers, the architects, the builders, the component suppliers and, for that matter, those who did building control. I believe that leaseholders' potential claims need to be put together, and that we need to get the insurance companies round the table and say that the surplus money will come from them, or else they can have expensive litigation backed by a Government agency, which they will lose.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the Father of the House, who has been indefatigable in his efforts on behalf of those affected by this crisis and of leaseholders more broadly. I should say, for his benefit and that of the House and the Opposition, that developers will be updating leaseholders on progress towards remediation quarterly on 31 January, 30 April, 31 July and 31 October each year—that will be public accountability.

I should also say for the benefit of my hon. Friend and the House that 96% of the most dangerous buildings—those with aluminium composite material cladding—have either completed or started remediation work.¹ There are other high-rise buildings with other forms of unsafe cladding—1,208 such buildings. They are in the building safety fund. More than 350 of those buildings have now been addressed, and more than £1.7 billion of Government money has gone towards making those buildings safe. Progress, but not at the pace that either of us would have liked. His point about insurance companies is well made, and I will follow up subsequently.

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

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I have a couple of quick questions.

On the developers who have not signed, the Secretary of State is obviously talking about the situation in England. Does he intend to share that information with the devolved Administrations? Those companies may have interests in devolved areas.

What happens if a non-compliant building has defects that extend beyond fire performance matters? Further defects are often discovered only after the opening works have commenced and cladding has been removed—I am thinking particularly of acoustic and thermal non-compliance. Could the Secretary of State tell us which independent bodies will manage the work to identify such defects, and how will developers be held to account for them?

Finally, what is the Secretary of State's plan when owners and/or developers of non-compliant buildings cannot be traced?

Michael Gove: We will certainly share information with the devolved Administrations. As I mentioned briefly, we want to work with the Welsh Government, and indeed with the Scottish Government, to ensure that everyone is in a safe building and that businesses that are not operating in accordance with their responsibilities cannot wriggle out of their responsibilities. I look forward to working with the new First Minister—whatever she is—in due course to achieve progress.

On non-compliant buildings, the hon. Gentleman is certainly right that, as we replace cladding, new faults are sometimes identified. Developers have a responsibility to deal with those if they were the original responsible actor. That brings me to his third question. Where it is not a developer who takes responsibility but a freeholder, our recovery strategy unit is working to identify all the freeholders responsible. It is only in the very last instance that leaseholders may be liable for costs, and even then, they are firmly capped under legislation that this House passed.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given the shortage of capacity, what steps are the Government taking to encourage more businesses and people to come forward to provide good-quality building and construction work?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We need to ensure that we have in the development sector, and indeed in the building safety sector, a range of companies and actors determined to do the right thing. Some of the changes that we are making—to the national planning policy framework, for example, and other steps that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will announce in due course—are designed to ensure that we have a diverse and energetic private sector market helping consumers and leaseholders.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Clearly, any progress in this matter is welcome for the leaseholders who are still sat there, wondering when something is going to happen to their unsafe homes. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), is coming to the Select Committee next Monday. I apologise in advance that, for personal reasons, I cannot be there, but I am sure the scrutiny will be just as effective under the oversight of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

1. [Official Report, 27 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 5MC.]

[Mr Clive Betts]

A number of issues have been raised with the Select Committee. First, in terms of the agreement that developers are signing, it was said to us that the remediation standards developers will have to work to will not be as strict as those under the Building Safety Act. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether that is true? Secondly, the Committee spoke to product manufacturers the other week, who said that they had had no contact with the Department for the last 12 months. Is that true, and if so, when will that contact be renewed, so that they can be held to account?

Finally, the Minister says, “I’m going to look at this” every time I ask him. Kate Henderson of the National Housing Federation told the Committee on Monday that the cost of remediating these matters will be £6 billion for social housing providers. They have only had a tiny bit of money under the ACM cladding measures. Will the Secretary of State look at that again? Otherwise, there will be cutbacks to the house building programme that they all want to engage in.

Michael Gove: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for his questions. I note his apology for not being able to be there to cross examine my hon. Friend the Minister for local government and building safety next Monday. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) will do a brilliant job. They are the Morse and Lewis of—

Mr Betts: Which one’s which?

Michael Gove: Well, quite. I know that they will show endeavour in asking the right questions.

On remediation standards, I do not believe it is the case that the developers are being held to any less high a standard than that which exists in the Building Safety Act, but I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and others to identify any gap between what the Act makes provision for and anything that developers have committed to do.

It is the case that I have not been in touch with the Construction Products Association as a corporate body for a while. We have been pursuing individual construction product companies, but of course, our actions have to take account of the actions of others who may be pursuing them for criminal activity and liability.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about the National Housing Federation, I have been in conversations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about what more we can do to support the social housing sector. How richly those conversations bear fruit, we will have to see.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The Secretary of State is well aware of the situation with Cardinal Lofts. Today at 10 minutes past two, a formal prohibition notice was served, so any remaining constituents of mine in that building will be obliged to leave. One of the worst things is the lack of timescale for how long my constituents will be in limbo. They cannot plan their lives—their lives are on hold. Will the Secretary of State work with me to try to get that certainty as soon as possible and look into compensation that goes beyond covering temporary accommodation? The extent to which their lives has been affected is unacceptable. He will also know that Railpen was aware of these issues for two years before it decided to take any action at all.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right, and he has been a fantastic champion for the residents of Cardinal Lofts and other people affected by this. I think I am right in saying that Railpen is the ultimate owner of the freehold for this building. It is the pension fund for those who work in the rail sector. There are good trade unionists on the board of that pension fund to whom I appeal to show the same degree of energy in helping working people as my hon. Friend. While pension funds of course have fiduciary responsibilities and all the rest of it, it is vital that we do right by the residents of this building. I hope I will have the chance to visit Ipswich soon, to make good on that commitment.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his care in this matter, but I still have hundreds of constituents who are in financial limbo and mental turmoil because of safety problems that are not of their making. Frankly, West Ham is a building site at the moment. Stratford, West Ham, Plaistow and Canning Town all have major building contracts ongoing. If the developers are not on the “goodie” list of those who have signed the right bits of paper, what happens to that development and the oversight of it? I know that my constituents would want me to ask this: what will he be able to do for those who have not been fully covered by the remediation contract?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for standing up so well for her constituents, as she always does. Actions have to have consequences. The overwhelming majority of developers have done the right thing by signing this contract. It would be wrong for anyone who has wriggled out of their responsibilities to be allowed to continue to make a profit when others are shouldering these responsibilities. It is the case that if a company is not on, as she puts it, the goodie list, that will be it—development will have to pause, and we will make sure that their shareholders and investors pay the price for the irresponsibility of their directors.

On the broader point, if the hon. Lady, on behalf of her constituents, would like to get in touch with my Department and, in particular, our recovery strategy unit, there may well be developments or buildings in her constituency that are not covered by this where there are freeholders or other people responsible whom we need to track down. We look forward to working with her.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress he is making. Leaseholders are the most important people we have to look after. There will be people who have paid out huge sums of money to companies that are on the goodie list of those who signed this contract. They will want to know what happens to them. There will be people who have received estimates for huge amounts of money they are expected to pay. What happens to them? Most importantly, there are leaseholders who reside in buildings the developers of which we do not know and are not covered by this. Will my right hon. Friend set out the position for those people and give us a guarantee that, if we cannot trace the developers, the Government will step in and put this right for the people who live in these properties?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. One thing that I was aware of before doing this job but have become clearer on since is that there are

actors in the property market operating in the UK who hide behind opaque corporate structures, operate offshore and set up special purpose vehicles in order to get building done and then disappear from their responsibilities afterwards. That is why we set up the recovery strategy unit, and it is no criticism of any of our predecessors, because we have not faced a situation quite like this before. The whole purpose of the recovery strategy unit is to identify the ultimate beneficial owner of the building who should take responsibility. Developers who are operating as responsible plcs have all signed this contract. That is great and a real step forward, but there is still more to do.

On the point about leaseholders, we have a system that we have legislated on—it is not perfect, but it is a big step forward—which means there is a cap on the individual liability of any leaseholder, and the taxpayer has committed significant sums. I think—and I suspect this is a view shared across the House—that the building safety crisis shines a light on sharp practice by a small minority of people in the broader property sector that we need to take several steps to deal with, including improved land transparency legislation and other steps that will ensure we do not have a butler economy in this country, whereby people operating in the property sector put profit ahead of people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I need to reiterate that I can only call Members who arrived at the beginning of the statement. It is the responsibility of Members to make sure they get here in time to hear the Secretary of State's statement from the beginning. I assure Members that I and the other Deputy Speakers are even-handed about this.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I very much welcome this statement, but I want to ask the Secretary of State about people living in buildings under 11 metres. The Government were not prepared to extend full coverage to them but said they would look at those buildings on a case-by-case basis—a commitment that the Secretary of State repeated this afternoon. Could he tell us how that is going? How many of those buildings have had assistance? What criteria are he and his colleagues using in deciding where to offer help? Does it include, for example, cases where the developers or builders went bust years ago? Does it include buildings where the leaseholders still cannot sell their flats because mortgage companies will not lend on them, despite the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors advice?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. In most cases, a building under 11 metres which might, for example, have cladding on it, or might have some of the materials that in other circumstances would be systemically unsafe, does not have safety risk. We need to look proportionately at each building, and that takes time. Thanks to the energetic efforts of the Minister for building safety, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, we have reached agreement with a majority of lenders, which are now lending against properties, because through the engagement we have had with them, there is now a more proportionate way of deciding whether or not to lend against those buildings. As we have discussed in the past, however, let us look at individual cases, and if constituency cases and examples have come to light that

the right hon. Gentleman feels are not captured by the steps we have taken so far, I look forward to working with him to address them.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and the progress he is making on this issue, but action is still needed to address what has become a two-tier system of building safety support for leaseholders. As has already been mentioned, leaseholders in Battersea who reside in buildings under 11 metres or in a development that has become an enfranchised building do not qualify for the support for which other leaseholders rightly qualify. They feel abandoned by this Government. If the Government are looking at this issue on a case-by-case basis, I would love to understand a bit more how it will work, because I want to ensure that those leaseholders are getting the support they need.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. In the legislation, there is a category of non-qualifying leaseholders: people who have more than one property.¹ We wanted to attempt to draw the line in order to ensure that, for example, significant investors—people with significant means—were not benefiting from a scheme that was designed for every man and woman, as it were. However, I have some constituents who are in the same boat as the hon. Lady's, and we are looking at the situation to try to make sure that we do not have people at the margins who are being treated unfairly. I cannot make any promises at this stage, but the hon. Lady raises an important point, and we are aware of it.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I address the right hon. Gentleman as a fellow Scot, and I welcome the new spirit of accord that there will surely be between himself and the new First Minister, whoever she or he is. As I drive through the right hon. Gentleman's home city of Aberdeen, I see the high-rise flats. I do not know what condition those flats are in, but it occurs to me that a similar dialogue between a Scottish local authority such as Aberdeen City Council and a suitable one south of the border could be very constructive when sorting these problems out. Will the Secretary of State undertake to encourage that sort of co-operation?

Michael Gove: Yes. The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, and he is absolutely right: co-operation between councils, between the UK Government and local authorities in devolved areas, and between the UK Government and devolved Administrations is the way forward. We all deserve Governments who are working together to resolve this issue. He makes a very good point: in Aberdeen, as well as in Dundee, Glasgow, Edinburgh and some other areas, there are high-rise buildings that are in precisely this situation. It would be a pleasure to work with the Lib Dem coalition council in Aberdeen to try to make sure that that council can benefit from the experience of local authorities in England.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): During the Secretary of State's statement on 30 January, I asked about the problem of excessive insurance charges being imposed on leaseholders. He recognised the problem, and promised

1. [Official Report, 27 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 6MC.]

[*Sir Stephen Timms*]

“additional Financial Conduct Authority and Government co-ordinated action”—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2023; Vol. 727, c. 55.]

to address it. Can the Secretary of State update us on progress? By the way, he has not yet replied to my letter to him on this subject, dated 13 January.

Michael Gove: I apologise to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee for the discourtesy. I will have a word with my private office team; it is my fault that he has not received a reply.

I hope to update the House shortly on the progress we are making with the FCA and others on insurance costs. When I made the statement last time around, I explained the steps we are taking with managing agents and intermediaries, but the right hon. Gentleman is right—as is the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—that there are broader issues in the insurance market that we need to address.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is important that we see which developers have actually commenced or completed works, not just signed up to the contract. My understanding is that only 11 of the non-ACM buildings in England have been remediated and signed off, so will the Secretary of State publish a full list of the works that are under way from different developers?

Secondly, the Secretary of State made a bit of a gibe at Wales, but the reality is that we need to work together across the UK on this issue. What is he doing about the pipeline of contractors and surveyors? A remediation project in my constituency had to be stopped recently because a contractor was having an issue separately in England. This issue does not require gibing between the two Governments: it requires working together.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes two very important points. On the first, we will work with those who have signed the contract to publish an update on the work that has been done, and as I mentioned, we will share quarterly updates with the House and with everyone affected in order to hold developers to account. Given the willing heart with which most have signed, I am very confident that we will see good progress.

On the point about the situation in Wales, again, I always enjoy working with Ministers in the Welsh Government to achieve our common ends across the United Kingdom. I absolutely take the hon. Gentleman's point in good part.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Looking at the finer details of the developer contract that some developers have signed—I think the Secretary of State said 39 had done so—I see that it does not cover all the fire defects laid out in the Building Safety Act. Why is that, and who is going to pay for that work?

Michael Gove: That point has been made by other hon. and right hon. Members. I do believe that developers are living up to their responsibilities to deal with life-critical safety defects in medium and high-rise buildings, but as we have discussed, some buildings fall outside those categories. We are working on bespoke solutions for those.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, not only are developers frustrating leaseholder rights. In response to his last statement, I raised the case of Mandale House in my constituency; leaseholders in Daisy Spring Works have the same, or a similar, problem. The common factor is the managing agents, Y&Y Management, which also has freehold interests. That company is not simply denying leaseholders their rights: it is doing so on the basis of challenging the legality of the Secretary of State's own legislation. Those leaseholders do not have the resources to challenge Y&Y's lawyers, so I have shared the relevant information with the Secretary of State's Department. Can he reassure me that he will use all of the resources at his disposal to tackle Y&Y and ensure its leaseholders get the rights under the Building Safety Act that he intended?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I want to be really fair to the hon. Member: he is doing the right thing. He has highlighted an abuse and has contacted the Department in a co-operative and detailed fashion. The Minister for Building Safety, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, has been looking closely at that case. There is more that we can do, and I thank the hon. Member on behalf of his constituents for being tenacious in trying to get a good deal for them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I have a Galliard development in my constituency, and my constituents will be concerned that Galliard has not signed. They would like to hear from the Secretary of State what that means for them. They have life-critical safety defects in the building, which is shocking, because that building construction was paused as a consequence of the tragedy at Grenfell, yet Galliard went on to develop a building that has those defects. What does today's statement from the Secretary of State mean for my constituents who are waiting to hear from Galliard about the state of their buildings?

Michael Gove: This is a sad note on which to come to the conclusion of the statement, because Galliard is one of the companies that has been the most recalcitrant throughout, and I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's constituents. Other companies have done the right thing and have done so with a willing heart, but Galliard has held out—it has briefed against the Department and all the rest of it. Unless Galliard signs, it will face consequences, and its business model will be fundamentally challenged by the legislation that we in this House have passed. Ultimately, with a company such as Galliard whose owners, directors and investors are determined not to play ball, the consequences will come for it. I want to be clear with the hon. Member and this House that Galliard will face condign consequences if it does not act.

AUKUS Defence Partnership

3.9 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk):

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the AUKUS defence partnership. Yesterday, the Prime Minister, standing alongside the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Australia, announced that our three nations would be jointly developing a conventionally armed—I stress that—nuclear-powered submarine, the SSN-AUKUS, which will come into service in the late 2030s.

Before I provide the House with more details about this landmark announcement, it might be beneficial for colleagues if I provide a brief summary of how we got here. For more than 60 years, the UK and the US have successfully collaborated on the development of nuclear submarines. This unprecedented co-operation goes to the very core of our special relationship. Currently, with the support of the United States, we have a fleet of five Astute-class submarines, with a further two boats to be built. These world-class vessels are an essential component of our defence and security apparatus in a more contested world.

More recently, Australia has also recognised the need for a stealthier and more enduring underwater capability to deter threats to the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific. That is why back in September 2021, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), while Prime Minister, announced to the House a pivotal new defence partnership involving the United States, Australia and the UK, otherwise known as AUKUS. The partnership involves two pillars: first, the joint development of a nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarine capability for Australia; and secondly, the creation of a suite of complementary technologies, among them hypersonics and cyber. It is the first of those pillars that I wish to focus on today.

For the past 18 months, we have been working closely with our trilateral counterparts to understand Australia's requirements, to make a detailed technical assessment and to set out the optimal pathway for delivering this unique platform. As the Prime Minister said last night, this scoping period has now concluded and a solution has been identified.

The SSN-AUKUS will be based on the design for the UK's Astute-class submarine replacement, SSN(R), which has been under development for several years. SSN-AUKUS will build on these firm foundations by incorporating cutting-edge US submarine technology, including the propulsion plant, combat systems and conventional weapons, but this boat will not just be of benefit to the Royal Australian Navy. It is now clear to us that the SSN-AUKUS, which is an evolution of SSN(R), should now become the UK's future platform as well, providing the future attack submarine requirement for the Royal Navy as well as the Royal Australian Navy.

As yesterday's refreshed integrated review underlines, we are having to contend with an increasingly volatile and complex environment, with multiple adversaries seeking to undermine our rules-based international order. In response, the deepening of our defence partnership offers three distinct advantages. First, it bolsters our undersea capability. It will give us the ability to deter future threats in the underwater battlespace, to protect

our nuclear deterrent and our vital sea lines of communication and to fulfil a range of military tasks, including anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare, land attack and intelligence gathering.

Secondly, AUKUS will bring a truly global and interoperable capability for our nations that is not just capable of operating in the Indo-Pacific, but strengthens our contribution to NATO in Europe. It will enable us to operate in the high north, where the impact of climate change is opening new military and commercial shipping access to the north Atlantic, and it will ensure that three like-minded nations with shared interests on the global stage can work together even more closely.

Thirdly, and finally, AUKUS helps us share the burden of research and development costs, not just giving us access to some of the most advanced technology on the planet, but allowing us to integrate our supply chains and provide greater resilience at a time of growing resource costs and inflationary pressures. It will also open up further opportunities for technology sharing and interoperability across the defence context.

The first SSN-AUKUS for the Royal Navy will be built in the United Kingdom and delivered in the late 2030s, taking full advantage of our many decades of experience in building nuclear-powered submarines. To support SSN-AUKUS, Australia has committed to making a proportionate financial investment in our submarine industrial base. SSN-AUKUS will support thousands of new jobs at Barrow-in-Furness and Derby and throughout the national supply chain. These are truly centres of excellence, and I am proud to say that they stand ready to support Australia in this endeavour. It is particularly good news that Rolls-Royce UK will be building the nuclear reactors for all of Australia's submarines.

We intend for the first SSN-AUKUS to come into service with the Royal Australian Navy in the 2040s, and Australia will receive substantial support to develop and operate these nuclear-powered submarines. Submariners from the Royal Australian Navy have already begun to train with the Royal Navy to gain the relevant experience and, alongside the US, the Royal Navy intends to increase the number of submarine deployments to Australia from 2026, building on the successful visit to Australia by HMS Astute in 2021. The United States has also signalled her intention to provide Virginia-class attack submarines to the Royal Australian Navy, with Australia planning to acquire three. Taken together, this plan is consistent with Australian sovereignty and international obligations. It systematically and carefully builds Australia's ability to safely and securely operate, maintain and sustain SSNs.

It goes without saying that compliance with non-proliferation requirements is paramount, and I reassure the House that throughout this process we will remain fully committed to setting the highest non-proliferation standards. We are undertaking every step in a way that reflects our long-standing leadership in global non-proliferation and our steadfast support for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. We have been clear that we will pursue this endeavour in a way that sets a strong precedent for states seeking to develop a naval nuclear propulsion capability. We have consulted, and we will continue to consult regularly and transparently with the International

[Alex Chalk]

Atomic Energy Agency with respect to the development of a suitable nuclear safeguards approach. The IAEA director general has expressed his satisfaction with our engagement.

This is a momentous journey for us all. For maritime nations such as the UK, as well as Australia and the US, maintaining a capability advantage over potential adversaries is essential. For the UK, AUKUS represents an historic opportunity for a deep, enduring and mutually beneficial partnership with two of our closest allies—a partnership that will strengthen the resilience of our nuclear submarine enterprise and will bring with it investment and high-skilled, high-wage jobs, as well as an even stronger and more capable Royal Navy submarine force. The United Kingdom will now begin embarking on delivering SSN-AUKUS, along with our allies. I look forward to keeping the House updated on how it progresses. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.16 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the advance copy of his statement. This AUKUS defence partnership has our fullest Labour support. The multi-decade agreement deepens security and opportunity between our three countries. It strengthens strategic security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. It promises not just jobs now, but jobs in the next generation and the one after that. It fulfils all our obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. I want to see Britain playing the biggest role possible in building these new submarines, with the first AUKUS boat launched as early as possible in Barrow.

Yesterday's 2023 integrated review states

"£3 billion will be invested across the defence nuclear enterprise".

How much of that total is going to Barrow and to Derby? The current funding of £85 million each for developing the new SSN(R) submarine runs out at the end of this month. As the Minister has mentioned, the AUKUS pathway report published by the Australian Government last night confirms that

"Australia will also make a proportionate financial investment in the UK and US industrial bases."

When will this investment in Barrow and Derby begin? How will the combined UK-Australian investment in the SSN-AUKUS programme be managed?

This AUKUS agreement is profound. It is not about any nation buying weapons systems off one another, or the Government contracting with major companies for a new platform; it is about building the industrial capability of all three countries. It is a national enterprise for the UK on skills and workforce, on technology, on security of essential supply chains and components, on sharing highly secret technologies and on decommissioning and recycling out-of-service subs, so who will lead this drive? How will the necessary co-ordination and integration be done? We know, as the Minister said, that Australian personnel have begun serving with the Royal Navy, and that the UK will increase SSN visits to Australia ahead of what is called the submarine rotational force west being created in 2027. How often and for how long will a UK Astute be rotated to Australia?

The UK's former National Security Adviser, Sir Stephen Lovegrove, has described the AUKUS pact as

"perhaps the most significant capability collaboration anywhere in the world in the past six decades",

because it is about more than just subs. Pillar 2 of the AUKUS partnership, which the Minister mentioned, promises potential co-operation on hypersonics, cyber, artificial intelligence and quantum computing. Those are essential capabilities that can be delivered before the new AUKUS subs enter service.

Yesterday's integrated review said little about pillar 2, so can the Minister overcome his reluctance and provide an update on it? What are its strategic objectives? What are its timelines? Which of the technologies has the highest priority? As the broad coalition of countries imposing sanctions on Russia has shown, some of our strongest and most reliable allies are in the Indo-Pacific. Could any other countries, beyond the three AUKUS nations, become involved in pillar 2 collaborations?

Finally, AUKUS is a national enterprise for the UK and a trilateral endeavour with our closest security allies. Will the Minister commit today to report regularly on progress with AUKUS to Parliament and to the public?

Alex Chalk: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He is absolutely right that this is an announcement of such moment that it will require cross-party and generational support. It is important to note precisely the scale of what is being proposed. As he rightly indicated, this is about not simply the sale of a weapons system, but the growth of a capability across continents and across generations. With scale comes opportunity: having that trilateral approach builds the resilience of the supply chain and of the industrial capability, which benefits Australia, of course, and the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about investment. I am pleased to note that, in the last financial year, £2 billion was invested into Barrow-in-Furness and Raynesway, as he will have seen, because I think he has had the opportunity to visit both recently. There will be further investment to come, partly as a result of what has been announced recently, and in the years to come, which echoes my point about it having to be sustained and continued. He is right, of course, to reference the fact that, in the document that accompanies the announcement, a copy of which I am sure he has seen, the Australians have indicated their agreement to make a proportionate investment in UK infrastructure.

The right hon. Gentleman is correct to ask about co-ordination, because this has to be co-ordinated. The way that happens is, first and foremost, to ensure that the Australian experts who need to develop that expertise, as they have candidly acknowledged, spend time in the UK—in Barrow and Raynesway. Indeed, this Thursday, I am looking forward to going to Barrow with the Premier of South Australia—South Australia being the place where the first SSN-AUKUS for the Royal Australian Navy will be built.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of AUKUS pillar 2. I have had the opportunity to speak to my opposite number here in the UK to discuss precisely that. There are a number of aspects to it, as he indicated, such as hypersonics, AI and underwater technologies, and further detail will be explored in due course. To his point about other countries, I can say that, unlike

pillar 1, which is not open for engagement beyond the three nations, we will of course consider the interest that other nations have expressed in pillar 2.

As is well expressed in the fact sheet that accompanies the announcement, AUKUS—whether pillar 1 or pillar 2—is designed to show:

“our shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and an international system that respects the rule of law, sovereignty, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of disputes free from coercion.”

That is what our nations stand for, and that is what AUKUS will deliver.

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

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): As somebody who is passionate about UK security and Britain's place in the world, I could not hide my deep disappointment yesterday when the new integrated review spelled out a deteriorating global threat picture, but offered no new investment in our conventional forces. We are back here today, however, and I welcome this landmark announcement of ever greater collaboration between three trusted allies. Our political relationship with Washington experienced a bumpy patch post Brexit—I say that as a US-UK dual national—so it is good to see it back where it should be. Indeed, landing AUKUS, the Paris agreement and the Windsor framework shows that statecraft has returned to No. 10.

The procurement programme is for the long term and the first subs will not arrive for another couple of decades, yet the threat picture is deteriorating rapidly. If we are to commit to the Indo-Pacific tilt, does the Minister recognise the urgent need to increase the surface fleet, so that we can meet our responsibilities there?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is assiduous in his attention to the issue of the deterrent and the nuclear submarine capability in general. His point about the surface fleet is absolutely right. As a relatively new Minister coming into the Department, it has been encouraging to see the approach taken on Type 31—in other words, the choice of a platform that is deliverable, affordable and configurable to a mission. We have to move beyond a situation where exquisite and highly expensive capabilities are not necessarily operating on a particular mission to their full specification, so Type 31s can be reconfigured for anti-piracy missions, war-fighting missions or humanitarian missions. The British people want to see British warships and frigates acting in the national interest abroad in a sustainable and affordable way, and that is the approach we are taking.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I am not a huge advocate of nuclear submarines, but I recognise their dynamic advantages over air-independent propulsion, in terms of range, speed and duration. Moreover, as the SNP's lead on defence, I spend my time engaged on the defence posture and resources that an independent Scotland will require to defend our national interests and those of our allies collectively, in a way that is consistent with Scotland's defence and security priorities, so I will not lecture Australia or the United Kingdom on what is right for them. I encourage the Defence Procurement

Minister to acknowledge the outstanding engineering prowess that supports attack submarines at Thales in Glasgow and MacTaggart Scott in Loanhead. Nevertheless, I wish everybody in Barrow-in-Furness every success with the work and I hope it generates great prosperity there.

I note the challenges in delivering Astute-class SSN in the UK, with boats one to three being delivered five years late and 53% over budget. What assurances has the UK given to the Australians that that contagion will not affect SSN-AUKUS? What about refit—will the UK be helping Australia with technology transfer and how to refit the boats? Presumably not, given that, due to the Ministry of Defence's dithering and short-termism, HMS Vanguard required seven years to overhaul and refuel, rather than the planned two, with an attendant cost explosion.

Of the 21 submarines languishing at end of life—seven at Rosyth and a further 14 at Devonport in England—only seven have been defuelled. This scandal sees the previous HMS Vanguard, which went out of service in 1980 and has a 62-year-old hull, still sitting there waiting for the Government to put the money in to safely dispose of it. We have the industrial expertise in the United Kingdom to do that work, so why are the Government not funding their responsibilities? Has the UK cautioned the Australians that it is not enough simply to fund the build, commission and operation of these nuclear submarines, because states must also allocate the budget for disposal? Has the MOD had that conversation, and if so, how did it manage the hypocrisy of it all?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his sunny observations, which were hugely appreciated. If I can begin at the end, I was disappointed to hear him asking questions about whether the Australians have been reminded about decommissioning, because it is in the very document that I would have thought he had read. This document, at page 41, talks about radioactive waste management and Australia's plans to do precisely that, so I am pleased to have been able to deal with that.

On the issue the hon. Gentleman raised about the expertise in Scotland, let me join him, in the spirit of unity across the House, in commending the excellence in Scotland. I am delighted that it is the Ministry of Defence in a British Government that has ensured that those brilliant experts in Scotland have got the ships to work on. That simply would not happen in the event of independence, and he needs to be straight with the Scottish people about that.

On the second issue about refitting, let me say that one advantage of co-operating across the three nations is that we have not only the broader industrial capability to build these boats in the first place, but the capability to develop them over time. One thing he will well understand, as others in the House also recognise, is that it is not enough to think about the capability of the platform on day one; we have to consider how it will develop through the years. Our ability to do that and to ensure that it remains at the cutting edge is immeasurably enhanced by the fact that we are operating across the three nations.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about dismantling, I hope I can reassure him. Swiftsure, one of the boats he referred to, is being dismantled as the demonstrator—that will be completed by 2026—and low-level radioactive

[Alex Chalk]

waste has been removed already from Swiftsure, Resolution and Revenge. The matters are in hand, and they will continue at pace.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to my hon. and learned Friend, the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister, and to their teams, for getting this bold and visionary deal over the line? AUKUS will provide resilience for our submarine programme, and capacity and capability between our three nations, and it will secure our allies in uncertain times, and deliver jobs and investment in Barrow. It will be a true win-win. Further, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is testament to the remarkable skills of the ship makers in Barrow that Australia chose a submarine designed by Barrovians for its future fleet? Will he join me in thanking and paying tribute to the hard work they do day in and day out, at the shipyard and in the wider submarine programme, to keep us and our allies safe?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for his heartfelt and powerful tribute to the people he represents, and he is absolutely right. This decision is a vote of confidence—not just a British Government vote of confidence, but an international vote of confidence—in the good and skilled people he represents. Let us be clear that this is a British design that will be enhanced principally by US but also by some Australian technology. It is an excellent example of where international scale allied with British know-how and British hard work can produce something genuinely world beating not just for this generation, but to ensure that future generations—our children and grandchildren—can enjoy the safety we have enjoyed.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome this announcement. Last year, I visited Australia, and one thing that impressed me was that, for Australia, this is a national endeavour. With meetings at federal level and obviously with the state premier of South Australia, this is a joined-up national endeavour, including looking at skills not just for today, but for the future.

I noticed that, in the new refresh of the integrated review yesterday, it says:

“We have also: announced...Great British Nuclear, to progress a resilient pipeline of new nuclear projects”.

The fear I have is that we are not matching the endeavour of the Australians. Could the Minister explain how we will get that concentration on skills—not just today, but in future—especially with the Business Department shilly-shallying around the investment for Rolls-Royce in the small modular nuclear reactors?

Alex Chalk: May I welcome the right hon. Member's approval, which is appreciated? He is right that it is a joined-up endeavour in Australia. It has to be, and the Australians well understand the enormous scale of what they are taking on. As he indicated, I look forward to welcoming the premier of South Australia in Barrow this Thursday. His point about skills is well made. We are clear, as are those at Raynesway in Derby, and in Barrow and Furness, that we need to grow the skills pipeline, but that has already begun. If we consider the £2 billion invested last year, yes, some of it went to new buildings and equipment, but it also went to ensuring that the capacity and college facilities to bring on those

apprentices are in place. Someone who goes to Derby can be briefed now about precisely what is taking place. The excitement, enthusiasm and drive that is going into ensuring sufficient suitably qualified and expert personnel is reassuring and encouraging. The right hon. Gentleman is making the right point, and I am pleased to reassure him that that matter is not lost on those involved.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I warmly welcome the announcement and the work that has gone into it. Can the Minister give the House any indication of the first phase of roll-out, and of how many submarines of the new type will be built? How many of those could be for the Royal Navy?

Alex Chalk: We know, come what may, that the first of these submarines will be built in Barrow, and we have already begun the procurement of long-lead items for that initial batch. Precise numbers will emerge in due course, and that will depend on all sorts of things, including how quickly the Australian industrial base matures and so on. I reassure my right hon. Friend that the first boat will be built here in the UK, and work is being done to ensure that the necessary components for future builds are already being procured.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I welcome this development, as well as the announcement from the Prime Minister, an American Democrat President and an Australian Labour Prime Minister, showing unity between parties and across countries on this vital endeavour. However, I think the Minister is unreasonably complacent. It is not clear who is in charge, and lack of clarity leads to delay and disruption. If we look at the Polaris agreement—it was signed at Nassau in 1962, and HMS Resolution was laid down in 1964, launched in 1996, and commissioned in 1967. Who will be doing that? On the nuclear aspect, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, the report states that we will be looking to

“align delivery of the civil and defence nuclear enterprises”

and goes on to mention the development of

“small modular reactors in the UK through Rolls-Royce SMR;”.

Yet the Treasury is sabotaging that project. It is demanding endless inquiries and evaluations, and is now talking about having a competition with international competitors to try to undermine Rolls-Royce. We do not have that link-up between the civil and military enterprise, so when will somebody get a grip?

Alex Chalk: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks, but I do not recognise the points he is making. As far as Rolls-Royce is concerned, the Government are absolutely behind that fantastic facility—

John Spellar indicated dissent.

Alex Chalk: I have been there recently, and I am pleased to say that they are. Rolls-Royce recognises the importance of this programme. One thing that is clear about building nuclear powered submarines is that unless we keep the drum beat of “always-on” manufacture, it is easy for those skills to erode. I am delighted that this programme ensures that we will be building reactors now and in the future for generations to come. That means we will keep those expert personnel, ensure a pipeline of staff, and we will be experts for many years to come.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend on the work he has done with his Department, his team, and the Ministry of Defence as a whole. The changing geopolitical landscape, and the 360-degree view of NATO, make it vital that there is a silent capability in the Pacific, especially when we look at changes to the geopolitical energy demands coming from western South America. On pillar 2, and the development of weapons, if we are to expand to other nations to help with the development of highly complex weapons, on which I think the west would admit it is way behind the curve, has the Minister given any consideration as to how the UK and AUKUS members can work with PESCO nations which, as he will understand, are a closed shop and have made it difficult for a relationship to form? Will he give that issue some attention regarding how that relationship can be built moving forward?

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I am also grateful to him for the part he played in progressing this matter when he was in the Department. He comes to this subject with enormous knowledge of the NATO context. I want to pick up on his first point, on capability, because we have not spoken a vast amount about it. The ability to be stealthy and undetected is not a capability enjoyed by conventionally powered submarines, and that is one reason why the United States and the United Kingdom no longer operate them. It is vital that submarines have the range, the lack of detectability, and the ability to be more stealthy and detect more in terms of intelligence and so on, so I take that point. On his second point about pillar 2, he is absolutely right and I will certainly undertake to consider the matter he raises. We had very warm and positive discussions with the Australians here in the UK about pillar 2. I think there is a shared recognition among the United States, the UK and Australia that we need to move quickly. There is no time to lose.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On behalf of my party, the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the AUKUS defence partnership announcement. I endorse what the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) said about the stealth it will bring to our partnership. Like the Minister, the US President was at pains yesterday to stress that SSN-AUKUS will be nuclear powered but not nuclear armed. The Minister went further today and talked a little about compliance with international law on proliferation. The International Atomic Energy Agency is satisfied that Australia does not intend to pursue uranium enrichment. Given that since the announcement China alleges that AUKUS undermines the international non-proliferation system, will the Minister provide a little more assurance to the House and the British public that the initiative does indeed comply with the non-proliferation treaty?

Alex Chalk: I am happy to do so. The hon. Gentleman is right to say, of course, that this has nothing to do with nuclear weapons. I have made that crystal clear. The NPT is about the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, not nuclear propulsion systems. I am pleased to be able to indicate that the director general of the IAEA reported to IAEA member states that he believes the AUKUS partners are committed to ensuring the highest non-proliferation and that safeguard standards

are met. He noted his satisfaction with the engagement and transparency shown by the three countries thus far. Australia, in joining the UK and the US, has joined not just the strongest possible culture of safety, but the strongest possible culture of adherence to the rule of law. Indeed, these systems are the very tools that we bring to the table to defend the rules-based order.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): This is a very welcome agreement that helps to make the world just a little bit safer. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Faslane with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I met some of our submariners, went aboard one of our nuclear submarines and saw a reactor built by Rolls-Royce in Derby, which will have been made by some of my constituents. The announcement is incredibly welcome news for Derby and Derbyshire. What assessment has the Department made of the economic boost it will bring to the east midlands?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. He is a great supporter of his constituents who produce these brilliant reactors. I am so pleased he went to Rosyth and met the submariners, because I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to them. It is a tough job, candidly. They do on our behalf, out of sight and sometimes out of mind, an enormously important job and I know the whole House will join me in paying tribute to them for what they deliver for the security of our nation. The additional investment—let us be clear that the nuclear reactors will supply all the Australian SSN-AUKUS submarines—will mean thousands more high-skilled, high-paid jobs here in the UK. To the point made just a few moments ago, they will be welded shut nuclear reactors. I am happy to be able to make that point. They will not need to be opened or tampered with in any way during the lifetime of the submarine.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I was deeply disappointed with the funding announcement yesterday, which was woefully inadequate for our defence needs, but I fully support and welcome today's announcement and the AUKUS partnership. May I ask the Minister a specific question? Page 56 of the "Integrated Review Refresh" rightly refers to supply chain risks, particularly in terms of the five priority technologies. To ensure that we, along with our partners, produce and develop the best possible assets that can outmatch our adversaries, at what point will we hear—we still have not heard—when we will publish a strategy on semiconductors and quantum technologies?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is right that semiconductors and quantum technologies are significant. I am happy to write to him on that point.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome today's announcement as further evidence that we and our allies are taking seriously the threat of Chinese aggression in the Pacific, and taking action to deal with it. Apart from the strategic security advantages, the announcement offers economic benefit to the United Kingdom. The Minister has indicated that the defence supply chain should benefit, and it is reported that Barrow shipyard, Rolls-Royce, Thales and more will be in line to benefit. Is the Minister in a position to

[Sammy Wilson]

indicate whether this announcement will lead to extra high-value jobs in engineering and defence in Northern Ireland?

Alex Chalk: It is overwhelmingly likely that this announcement will have a positive impact across the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland. Inevitably, precisely how it shakes down will become clear in the fullness of time, because we will need to see the extent to which the supply chains are met in the UK, the United States and Australia. There is the rub—the point of all this is that all three countries bring that element of resilience. Already, Australia has certain capabilities in pressure hull steel, valves, pumps and batteries; we have capabilities in nuclear reactions and so on; and the United States brings weapons systems and various other technologies to bear. That resilience in the supply chain is important to ensure not just that the current submarines can be fitted out and produced, but, vitally, that there is a pipeline in future, because it sends the strongest possible demand signal not just now but for generations to come.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend will have noticed that China has been quick to condemn our historic AUKUS agreement as a “path of error”. It also still refuses to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Does he agree that that illustrates both the difficulty that we face in determining our relationship with Beijing and why AUKUS is so important for our security?

Alex Chalk: It is important to note that we are looking to have an interoperable presence with our allies in the Indo-Pacific as a whole. Although my hon. Friend is right and proper in identifying China, which the Prime Minister said presented an “epoch-defining systemic challenge”, it is also correct to say that the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States want to ensure that all of the Indo-Pacific remains free for those who believe in the international rules-based order and the rule of law. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that when it comes to China, we have grave concerns about human rights violations and other aggressive actions. That is why we want to ensure the capability to allow our values and what we stand for to be properly represented and upheld in that vital part of the world.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Many in the world are concerned that this agreement undermines, if not breaches, the non-proliferation treaty. Will the Minister assure us that it will be constantly under review and will be reported to the NPT review conference when it comes along? Will he also explain the longer-term implications of this in stoking up a cold war with China? That is likely to increase defence expenditure by the UK, the US, Australia and China in future, leading

to greater danger in the South China sea. What is his aspiration for a more peaceful relationship in the long term that will not cost such vast amounts of money for all the countries concerned?

Alex Chalk: May I reject in the strongest possible terms what the right hon. Gentleman says? I do find it troubling that he is so ready to take the side of any country that stands potentially in opposition to the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn indicated dissent.

Alex Chalk: The right hon. Gentleman is the self-same man, I am sorry to say, who in 2014 blamed NATO for Russian aggression. Now, again, he wants to take the side of others. This is the country, together with its allies, that believes in what he should believe in: the international rules-based order and the assertion of those rights in a contested world. We will continue to do that, and we will not be knocked off course by those who try to do our country down.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that major defence announcements such as this one should not be considered in isolation? By far the biggest foreign policy challenge that we face is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Western strategies are largely dependent on economic sanctions against Russia, but those sanctions have been blunted by the fact that Russia has been able to find other markets with which to trade. What assessment has the Minister made of whether the AUKUS security pact will help or hinder our strategies to bring Russia’s war to an end?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we have to ensure that our defence nuclear programme progresses in the way that I have indicated, but not to the exclusion of what we are properly doing on the continent of Europe. I am proud, and I think this whole House can be proud, that after the United States there is no nation on the planet that has done more than ours to provide military equipment to the Ukrainians: more than 100,000 artillery shells, 200 armoured fighting vehicles, night vision goggles, more than 10,000 anti-tank weapons, winter clothing and so on. We do all this and more because we believe that we need to send a message from this country that might is not always right and that our country can be counted on to stand up to bullies.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for almost three quarters of an hour.

Point of Order

3.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Wednesday of last week, I initiated a debate in Westminster Hall on the subject of genomics and national security. In the course of that debate, the Minister responding—the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who has been notified of this point of order—stated that the Chinese genomics giant, BGI Group, had been responsible for several hacking attacks on Genomics England. The next day, on 9 March, a letter of correction was published in the *Official Report* at column 2MC:

“An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been...‘There is no evidence of attempted hacking of Genomics England in 2014 from BGI.’” — [Official Report, 9 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 2MC.]

First of all, that correction was brought to my attention yesterday by a journalist. At no stage did the Minister’s office contact me to make me aware of its intention to correct—or, perhaps more accurately, alter—the record in that way. Can you clarify for me, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether that conforms to the rules surrounding changes of that sort?

Secondly, is this not an abuse of the procedures for correcting the record? It is not a matter of detail, but a flat contradiction of what the Minister said. In Westminster Hall, the Minister was recounting an incident of which he had personal knowledge. There was nothing to correct. The only explanation that I can see is that the company in question, BGI, has got at the officials in the Minister’s Department and that they have buckled to the pressure.

It is, of course, for Ministers and officials to stand up to or buckle to pressure as they choose, but the *Official Report* belongs to Parliament. Mr Speaker has been robust in other areas in defending the rights of parliamentarians against outside pressures, especially those coming from China. What can you and he do, Mr Deputy Speaker, to bring the same protections to bear in respect of the *Official Report*?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for notice of his point of order—hence the more detailed response that I am about to give him.

There is a process in place to enable Ministers to correct the record. It requires the original words used by the Minister to remain in the published official record, but a link is added to the letter of correction subsequently provided, subject to the agreement of the Editor of the *Official Report*. The right hon. Member has put his views about the correction on the record; other readers of the *Official Report* will be able to draw their own conclusions from the Minister’s original comments and the subsequent correction.

However, the process also requires the Department to inform Members involved in any exchanges that lead to a correction. The Department should have done so in this case, rather than leaving the right hon. Member to hear about the correction from a journalist. I am sorry that that did not happen in this case, and I trust that Ministers will ensure that Members are properly informed in future.

I also note that the Procedure Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry into ministerial corrections. The right hon. Gentleman is welcome to make representations to that Committee about the operation of the process.

Planning (Quarries)

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

3.55 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to introduce a presumption in planning decision-making against approving quarry development in close proximity to settlements; to require the risks of proposed quarrying sites to the environment and to public health to be assessed as part of the planning process; to provide that the decision on a planning application for quarry development may only be made by the Secretary of State; and for connected purposes.

Let me start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who submitted a similar Bill in December 2021. In that Bill, he raised the difficulty that local people experience in resisting planning applications that are favourable to the planning authority and to big businesses that do not have a stake in the local area of concern. That is what I will focus on today.

The unique geography of Eastleigh is both a blessing and a curse, with the rivers Itchen and Hamble flanking the boundaries and with access to the southern tip of the constituency and the village of Hamble limited to a single arterial road, the B3397, called Hamble Lane. Since 2013 an area of green space, the old Hamble airfield—a former RAF airfield—has been allocated under Hampshire County Council's mineral and waste plan as a potential quarry site for aggregate. Over the past year, local residents and I have been resisting a planning application by the company Cemex to open a quarry for the extraction of 1.7 million tonnes of gravel by dozens of heavy goods vehicles along that single arterial route.

What has struck me, and my constituents, is the stark inadequacy of the planning process surrounding quarries, along with the favourable advantage for companies versus the voices of local people, and the fact that planning responses are not suited to addressing the scale of the environmental and health horrors that such quarries can bring, particularly when built so close to schools, health centres and villages. Let me therefore set out in very simple terms what the Bill seeks to achieve, using the context of my constituency to explain why I believe that this change is needed.

First, I believe it is necessary to amend planning regulations to change the presumption in planning decision making to being against approving quarry development close to local amenities, schools and settlements. I was shocked to learn that the planning application tabled by Cemex had been lodged with a request for a quarry only 70 metres from residential properties and 100 metres from local secondary and primary schools. Furthermore, the village infrastructure in Hamble is already woefully overloaded and subject to a large amount of congestion outside normal rush-hour traffic.

During this whole sorry saga, the way in which Cemex has consulted the people of Hamble has been shameful. It has committed itself to the bare minimum of what is required during a planning consultation, and has provided highways responses based on outdated traffic data completed before the covid-19 pandemic. I consider that an industrial quarry such as this—which gives rise to various potential health concerns that I shall mention later—should not have been looked on

favourably by a local authority, given that it is so close to existing settlements, GP surgeries and schools, as well as a small village. Health professionals, local businesses, schools and more than 2,000 local people have objected to the proposal, but have been dismissed and ignored, despite the valid concerns that all of them have raised, with poor responses to their factual findings and to their own measured consultation responses.

The second issue, which is even more concerning to me, is the lack of evidence and the lack of scrutiny on the part of the highways authority about the risks of the proposal. When the development is up and running, 144 lorries per day will be using an already crumbling arterial route that has suffered chronic under-investment while the building of housing and other developments has been allowed to continue unchecked. That is why I believe there is merit in my second proposal, which is to remove the decision-making power on quarry applications from local authorities and transfer them to the Secretary of State. Such a change would ensure that the consultation and scrutiny applied to such applications would be treated more seriously, and would involve proper community consultation.

The latest highways data on this application has not relied on physical road assessments since 2017, against the recommendations of Hampshire County Council, but the application has been allowed to continue with a highways authority response that fails to take that into account. Areas such as Warsash, Sarisbury, Hamble and Bursledon will be affected by the excess traffic. I also struggle to justify to residents that the decision maker on this application is the authority that allocated the site in its minerals and waste plan in the first place. This is why all future applications should be decided by the Secretary of State and planning inspector.

The third proposal of my Bill is, to me, the most important. It relates to the health and environmental impact of quarries close to settlements. My Bill would impose a requirement that the risks of proposed quarrying sites be assessed as part of the planning process. Aside from the risks to road safety and access to and from local schools for young people, this proposal will directly harm the many small businesses in Hamble that rely on tourism and local investment. I believe that the proposal represents a material risk to the health of the local population through possible contamination and water run-off into the River Hamble, but I am especially concerned about air quality and the scientific facts around airborne particles known as silica that are created by quarrying. Scientific evidence has proved that quarrying creates dust that pollutes the air around the areas of operation.

Air quality has long been talked about as an issue. Since 1956, Governments have openly been aware of, and legislated on, air pollution and addressed the shocking risks to human health at the time. Governments and politicians are actively talking about air pollution and the effects on human health. As the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington has pointed out, on air toxicity, the Environmental Working Group, a US-based body specialising in research and advocacy, has already stated that

“none of the air quality standards for silica are adequate to protect people living or working near sand mining sites. The danger of airborne silica is especially acute for children...Silica air pollution

has become a danger for residents near open sand mining and processing. Children, older adults, and others with existing disease are especially at risk.”

As a result, the group has concerns for any resident living within 1,500 metres of an excavation site, where air pollution can be 10 times higher than the recommended limit. This proposed site is 70 metres from existing settlements, and therefore much closer than those outlined by the group as being at risk.

I feel the need to point out that I am not against quarries in principle, and this Bill does not seek to ban or stop the development of quarries, which are much needed for building the homes that we need across the country. However, I feel that the planning system is now woefully out of date. My constituents in Hamble, and in the wider Hamble valley, feel like they are banging their heads against a brick wall. The Government have previously made a great case, with which I strongly agree, that local people should have a deciding say in the development of their local area. They have raised their concerns, and I believe that it therefore falls to the Secretary of State to make these consequential decisions on whether to permit the establishment of quarries in areas close to settlements.

I would like to close by thanking my constituents, particularly the Hamble Peninsular Residents Group and Hamble Parish Council, for organising meetings and responses to the consultation run by Hampshire County Council, and for the overwhelming campaign that those organisations have run. I would also like to thank my colleagues who are supporting the Bill today, and in particular the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, who introduced this Bill a year ago. I am proud to promote this Bill and I hope that it will be one step further towards protecting the health and wellbeing of local residents up and down the country against ignorant planning systems that do not align with local democratic wishes or recognise the health risks as we understand them today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This is the opportunity for anybody who wishes to oppose the 10-minute rule motion to indicate that they wish to do so. I have had no notification of any opposition and I see none, so I shall pose the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Paul Holmes, Matt Western, Amanda Milling, Caroline Nokes, Mark Fletcher, Mrs Flick Drummond, Chris Clarkson, Sara Britcliffe and Stephen Hammond present the Bill.

Paul Holmes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 268).

Backbench Business

Ukrainian Refugees: Homelessness

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 29 June 2022 and 16 January 2023, on Ukraine Refugee Schemes, HC 464; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 30 March 2022, on Ukraine Refugee Schemes, Session 2021-22, HC 1223; Correspondence from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee to the Ministers for Housing and Homelessness, and Faith and Communities, on Ukraine Refugee Schemes, reported to the House on 23 January 2023; Written evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on LUHC Committee; Engagement Event: Homes for Ukraine and Ukraine Family Scheme, reported to the House on 16 January 2023.]

4.4 pm

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

That this House calls upon His Majesty's Government to support Ukrainian refugees living in the United Kingdom, to prevent homelessness amongst this group where possible and ensure it is brief, rare and non-recurrent where it cannot be avoided; and urges His Majesty's Government to work with partner organisations and local authorities to ensure refugees facing and experiencing homelessness are supported during their time living in the UK.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on such an important and timely issue. As Members will no doubt be well aware, last month marked a year since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began. This has displaced millions of innocent people, completely turning their lives upside down. More than 8 million refugees have been recorded to date, making it the largest humanitarian crisis Europe has seen since the second world war.

Great Britain has a proud legacy of compassion and of supporting refugees fleeing war zones. I join Members on both sides of the House in warmly welcoming the Government's ongoing response to the conflict in Ukraine. Since March 2022, we have welcomed 161,400 Ukrainian refugees to the UK. Further, the latest Home Office data shows that more than 23,500 Ukrainian visa extensions have been granted.

Last year, the Government acted with great urgency to introduce three revolutionary visa schemes, which aimed to provide support for individuals escaping the grave situation in Ukraine: the Ukraine family scheme; the Ukraine extension scheme; and Homes for Ukraine. Homes for Ukraine allowed our constituents to sponsor a Ukrainian national or family to come and live with them, provided they had suitable and appropriate accommodation to offer. Like others, I have been truly moved but unsurprised by the vast empathy and support shown by the general public across the United Kingdom in helping to welcome and house Ukrainians since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine just over a year ago.

Together, these schemes have proved a lifeline for many Ukrainian refugees, helping them successfully to find safety and sanctuary after fleeing conflict. The scenes in Ukraine are extremely harrowing, with completely merciless attacks on residential areas and even hospitals. This is no place for a child or family to have to live, constantly fearful of their lives and those of loved ones.

[*Bob Blackman*]

The welcome respite they receive when reaching the UK no doubt provides a glimmer of hope in their otherwise tragically upturned lives.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I absolutely agree that this was the right, empathetic and correct thing to do in response to the appalling number of refugees fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to something I said when Homes for Ukraine was introduced by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, just a few months after the evacuation of Afghanistan. I said that we should also be looking for homes for Afghans. I hope we might reflect on that in this debate.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am slightly constrained by the subject of the debate, as she knows. However, I take the issue of Afghan refugees very seriously indeed; some 11,000 are still in hotels in this country and without a proper place to live. I take the point, but Mr Deputy Speaker is looking at me as if to say, "Concentrate on Ukraine, not other refugees."

I declare my interest as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness. My co-chair, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), is in her place. We have held meetings with Ukrainian refugees, and it has become profusely clear to us that, far too often, the breakdown of the Government schemes is causing a new level of hardship for refugees. The Select Committee on Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on which I have the honour of sitting, has also done work on this issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He brings many debates to this Chamber and Westminster Hall, and I always support them—or by and large support them; there are one or two things on which we disagree.

Is the hon. Gentleman, like me and my Strangford constituents, amazed and sometimes overcome by people's generosity? I think of two people, Donald and Jacqueline Fleming, who have worked in Ukraine for more than 30 years and who provided homes for Ukrainian people in Northern Ireland. Not only that, but the church groups in my constituency have also reached out with a generosity that never fails to amaze me. Whenever we see such generosity, goodness and kindness coming through, does the hon. Gentleman, like me, feel that this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has many great people who offer so much to people when they need it most?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. He shares many of the views I have on homelessness and how to assist people. As I have said, I think we are all greatly pleased that the people of the UK offer assistance to people fleeing violence, and we will always do so, as a caring nation. In particular, I applaud those who provide additional help that is way above and beyond the call of duty.

There are a number of grave concerns about the increasing reports of Ukrainian refugees experiencing a breakdown of living arrangements, facing gaps in support,

and falling into homelessness or destitution during this cost of living crisis, which we all know is affecting so many of our constituents.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my co-chair of the all-party group on ending homelessness for securing this important and timely debate. He mentioned the evidence session we held just last month. Homelessness is a particular issue in London because of the higher living cost here. He may be aware that the latest data show that 1,210 Ukrainian households have presented as homeless in London alone, and that that is such a big issue. I declare an interest, in that I am co-chair of the all-party group on London—I chair it with another hon. Member. Does he agree that the Government support on this issue needs to be more targeted, especially in areas where there are high living costs and more need?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and I am coming on to some of the statistics, which affect not only London, but the whole UK. They emphasise how important this issue is and how important it is that the Government get a grip on the problem quickly.

A recent survey carried out with Ukrainian refugees found that they face a growing threat of homelessness or poverty: one in 10 of participants had been threatened with eviction at some point during their stay in the UK; and a further two thirds had little confidence in their ability to find private rented accommodation—we all know that that is difficult—whether that was due to high rents, the deposits required or other barriers, such as the need for rental guarantors.

As the hon. Lady said, the all-party group on ending homelessness held a meeting last month, where we looked at the evidence from those people directly affected. We had the privilege of hearing directly from three brave Ukrainian women who have all faced challenges in finding a safe home within the United Kingdom since the conflict began. The room was overflowing with Members, organisations and charities keen to listen to the heartfelt testimonies that the women bravely provided and to the offers of support that came from those organisations.

I want to provide a range of quotes from that evidence session. One woman courageously told us:

"I was forced to come to the UK with my 15-year-old son when the war in Ukraine began. We have been lucky with our amazing host family, and I have found a job that allows us to survive.

However, this is not a sustainable arrangement in the long term. We would now like to move out and rent a place of our own. But we cannot afford to because the cost of renting is so high...After I had paid the rent, me and my son would have nothing to eat.

It is still very difficult to find a place to rent because landlords insist on a guarantor, but my host family is not allowed to do this. The landlords asked me to pay six months' rent up front which is impossible in my situation."

That clearly demonstrates the problems faced by Ukrainian refugees navigating our housing market and the situation has certainly not been helped by the ongoing cost of living crisis we are all experiencing. A survey conducted among Ukrainian refugees showed that 60% of respondents had no savings at all. Among the 40% who did, nearly all reported not having more than 12 weeks'

worth of savings. How on earth, then, can we expect Ukrainian refugees fleeing war to provide a guarantor or pay six months' rent up front? It is impossible to do.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities recently published official statistics emphasising the scale of the problem. The figures showed that, between February 2022 and February 2023, a total of 4,630 Ukrainian households—not individuals, but households—received urgent homelessness assistance from their local authority in England. In my constituency, Harrow East, residents have welcomed 251 refugees via the Homes for Ukraine scheme, of whom 16 are currently homeless for various reasons. The figures get worse when we look at the whole of London, where, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall mentioned, 1,216 refugees have presented themselves as homeless so far.

I remind hon. Members that that is only a partial picture of the true scale of homelessness faced by this refugee community, as the statistics released by the Department are made up only from data that was voluntarily supplied by just under 69% of all English local authorities; 97 local authorities did not submit data for collection. We predict, therefore, that the total number of refugees seeking assistance is much higher. When she replies to the debate, will the Minister explain why the collection of this important data is not mandatory across English local authorities?

What the data does provide is some detailed analysis of those seeking assistance. I was saddened to learn that 69% of households receiving homelessness assistance have dependent children, who also face becoming homeless. Additionally, homelessness in this community seems to be growing, with an 8% increase in the number of households receiving assistance between January and February this year alone, and the figures only likely to worsen.

At the APPG meeting, it was abundantly clear that attendees felt that further action was necessary to ensure that refugees can access a safe and secure home, and above all avoid sleeping rough. There was general consensus on a number of recommendations of ways in which the design of funding and financial support could be improved to help to prevent homelessness among this vulnerable group.

The first is that, as the war continues to rage, financial support provided to hosts must be made more flexible, to ensure that no one falls through the gaps in assistance. For example, cases where sponsorships have been successful and developed into lodging arrangements are no longer in scope for funding. These successful living arrangements must be supported in the long term, and facilitated where possible, to prevent homelessness or destitution wherever we can. Nurturing these relationships prevents stress on local authorities, landlords and the refugees themselves.

Secondly, it is crucial that Ministers consider harmonising financial support across the schemes. Funding should be extended to those under the Ukraine family scheme, who do not currently receive any financial support and so must rely on their own very limited financial resources to get by. Further, the size of the family sponsored should be taken into account and reflected in the amount of financial support. As it stands, hosts sponsoring a family of two or a family of five receive the same financial support. Unsurprisingly, studies show more

than twice as many Ukrainians under the family scheme at imminent risk of eviction than those under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

At the APPG meeting, we heard from a refugee from Ukraine who is a British citizen. She told us:

"I have been struggling to support my mum through the Ukraine Family Scheme since she was forced to flee in March last year. Despite her age and dangerous heart condition, my 66-year-old mother has been sleeping in the kitchen of my flat for nearly a year because there are no affordable private rented properties in our area and the council have failed to house her.

I looked for accommodation for my mother to rent but I couldn't find anything we can afford. A tiny room to rent in our area is a minimum of £450 a month but the Housing Benefit my mother qualifies for is around £260. How can a Ukrainian refugee like my mum ever afford this?"

That is a perfectly reasonable question.

Another common trend among Ukrainian refugees under each of the three schemes was the significant lack of practical support available to them, particularly with the wide range of difficulties they experience when trying to navigate the various support systems presented to them. Our system is complex, and people coming from a war-torn country find it hard to understand and navigate it.

For example, a Ukrainian refugee who spoke to the APPG told us that, after being forced to leave her home and career as a medical doctor, she came to the UK all by herself. On arrival in London, she was abruptly told by a sponsor that the landlord did not want any refugees in his property. After several months of unrest and instability, she has finally found stable housing, but said:

"Since I arrived in the UK, lots of information has been thrown at me and there has been very little support to help me find a home or a job. This has significantly affected my mental health, which has been hugely challenging to access support for. I think the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme should be improved by requiring Housing Officers to meet refugees to help solve issues with sponsors from early on. Councils should provide people with personal plans to prevent their homelessness ahead of time rather than when someone submits a homelessness application.."

I could not agree more. That sensible recommendation, coming from a Ukrainian refugee, speaks volumes, because she and others in similar circumstances should have been helped. Under my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, local authorities have a duty of care to support people at risk of homelessness within 56 days—not solely when it is too late and they are already sleeping rough. The final improvement called for was that the Government should bring forward a new strategy for refugee integration and resettlement. While the Government's swift action to introduce the visa scheme was warmly welcomed by all, there are concerns about the long-term viability of such schemes.

Many of us will remember that, in the initial break-out of the war, speculation suggested it would be over in a maximum of six months. The initial design of the sponsorship scheme was therefore short term, focused on six-month placements. The Government have since encouraged hosts to continue to sponsor the guests beyond six months, and the payment for hosts can now be extended beyond that period. However, many sponsorships are still breaking down, leaving Ukrainians with limited alternative choices for somewhere safe to stay.

In her reply to this debate, will the Minister commit to ensuring that the Government support Ukrainian refugees through these welcome schemes for as long as

[Bob Blackman]

the war continues in Ukraine? The Government must also appoint a successor to my good friend Lord Harrington as Minister of State for refugees, to acknowledge the UK's long-standing commitment to compassion and its history of supporting refugees. I know my hon. Friend the Minister has a very full set of responsibilities, but I take the view that we should appoint a dedicated Minister for refugees. Can she update the House on progress in securing a successor to Lord Harrington?

Following the impactful meeting of the APPG for ending homelessness, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and I wrote to the Minister to share our concerns and outline the aforementioned potential solutions. I am pleased to say that the letter was signed by 74 further parliamentarians from across the House and all political parties, demonstrating excellent cross-party support and a strong will to resolve the plight of Ukrainian refugees. I urge the Minister to recognise the breadth of support from Members across the House for the policy recommendations I have outlined. I look forward to receiving her response to that letter at her earliest convenience.

Before I conclude, I acknowledge that many of the challenges facing Ukrainian refugees are a symptom of the acute lack of affordable housing in this country. I am a proud member of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, and that issue has become increasingly prominent in both recent and long-term inquiries. Over the last year, private rent has increased by 11.8% on average outside London and 15.8% in London itself. Support for private renters has not kept up with the real cost of renting, leaving far too many struggling to cover their rent while the rising costs of energy, childcare and food put more pressure on family budgets.

For Ukrainians, that lack of affordable housing severely restricts their ability to move on from sponsorship or family arrangements and into their own settled housing. Plainly, for many, moving into privately rented accommodation is simply out of the question any time in the near future, which, as I am sure the whole House will agree, is a sad reality.

I thank the three very brave Ukrainian women who came to Parliament and spoke courageously at the January meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness. I will share the words of one of those women, who powerfully set out the reality facing her and too many others:

“Because homes are currently unaffordable in the UK, some of my friends have been forced to leave and return to dangerous places in Ukraine with their kids. But I’m from Kherson and our city is being bombed every day. I’m homeless in Ukraine and I’m soon to be homeless here.”

I thank the Minister and the Government for their support for the Ukrainian community thus far. I hope that she will continue working constructively with the all-party group for ending homelessness so that we can ensure that homelessness among Ukrainian refugees living in Britain is prevented wherever possible and resolved quickly if it does tragically occur. I look forward to hearing no doubt short and insightful contributions from Front Benchers, and considerate comments from colleagues throughout the remainder of the debate.

4.25 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate. I agree with a lot of the points that he made.

From the moment Vladimir Putin launched his assault on Ukraine on that terrible morning of 24 February, we knew that our obligation to the Ukrainian people would need to extend far beyond the battlefield—our resolve that Ukrainian forces should get the supplies and equipment that they needed to resist, in time to drive back the Russian onslaught, would have to be matched by a determination that no Ukrainian fleeing the fighting would be left out in the cold. Although we can take great pride in the considerable support that we have lent to Ukrainian forces in the field—the UK is now clearly established as the second largest donor of military aid to Ukraine—when it comes to supporting those who have fled the conflict, our record has been far more mixed.

Hon. Members have painted a grave picture of the situation now facing many of the families who arrived in the UK through the Ukraine sponsorship scheme. More than 2,500 are now owed homelessness prevention or relief duty, and many thousands more are living in situations that are, or are rapidly becoming, untenable. Indeed, my hon. Friends and I warned in September last year—as the initial six-month sponsorships were due to expire—that community sponsorship was only ever intended as a short-term response to an immediate crisis, and that the Government needed to take urgent action to prevent thousands of refugees from falling into homelessness. It is frankly shameful that the Government failed to heed those warnings earlier.

Crucially, I argued at that time that Ministers needed to do much more to help Ukrainians to secure homes of their own, including by allowing local authorities to act as guarantors for Ukrainians entering the private rented sector. More than 45% of respondents to a recent survey reported that they encountered significant difficulties in accessing rented accommodation, so I again urge the Minister to look at what more can be done to help Ukrainians to navigate an increasingly dysfunctional housing market. The motion in the name of the hon. Member for Harrow East rightly draws attention to the importance of close collaboration between central Government and local government, which has also been touched on by a number of Members.

On the anniversary of the establishment of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, it is worth reflecting on just how much responsibility local authorities have been left to shoulder, from finding school places for Ukrainian children to ensuring that elderly refugees' healthcare needs are addressed. Now, they are increasingly acting as the backstop for those who have found themselves homeless. It is imperative that the Government commit to doing more to support local authorities that are helping refugees, beginning with providing greater clarity about how the £150 million homelessness reduction funding announced in December can be spent.

Finally, there is the issue of funding. Last month, the Local Government Association warned that the halving of funding for arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine scheme in 2023, and the ending of education funding this month, would present serious challenges to councils that are already exposed to high inflation and grappling

with overstretched resources. Ensuring that funding for local authorities is under constant review and commensurate with the needs of their Ukrainian guests is essential if we are to honour the commitments that we have made to those who have come to the UK in search of safety. We must ensure, too, that hosts get the financial support they need at a time of record high food and energy prices, so that no one is forced to make homeless the guests they once warmly welcomed into their homes.

I agree with what the hon. Member for Harrow East said about Lord Harrington. The Minister should revisit this, and we should be having more Zooms and more information with regard to the Ukrainian people who are residents in this country.

4.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on leading the debate and the important and pertinent points he made. I want to talk first about the situation in Scotland and then the cost of living crisis and some of the other issues that he highlighted.

One year on from Putin's illegal invasion, the message of the SNP to Ukrainian arrivals remains crystal clear: Scotland is their home for as long as they need it to be. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine last February, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recorded over 8 million refugees from Ukraine across Europe. That is around 20% of the Ukrainian population. From the outset of the crisis, Scotland has been ready to help. As the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said at the time,

"Let us let people in and do the paperwork afterwards."—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 8 March 2022; c. 11.]

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is right that we had the super sponsor scheme in Scotland, which everybody thought was a great initiative, but did it not fall foul of the point that the hon. Member for Harrow East made—namely, that we thought the problem was over when we got people to Scotland? We did not see it as a long-term exercise, and as a consequence, we have had almost 2,500 people living on cruise ships, which the British Red Cross rightly says is completely inappropriate for their needs. We are going to be dealing with these situations many times in the future. We must learn from the mistakes we have made this time and understand that, when the refugees arrive here, that is the beginning of the story, not the end.

Chris Stephens: I have great sympathy with that. One cruise ship is currently based in my constituency, at least until the end of the month, and I am going to touch on some of those issues. A lot of people thought that the situation would end quickly, and it has not. Governments across the board and all of us as elected Members should learn from things as they develop, so I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that point.

The super sponsor scheme has been overwhelmingly popular, with local authorities, the third sector and local communities all working in partnership. As a result, the last 12 months have seen nearly 23,000 people from Ukraine arriving to safety in Scotland, with over 18,900 of those arriving through the super sponsor scheme. That represents around 20.4% of all UK arrivals. The Scottish Government are supporting the scheme

with over £70 million allocated for the Ukrainian resettlement programme for 2023-24, to ensure that communities continue to receive help to rebuild lives.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the cruise ships—I have visited one to help people who became constituents. As I said in the Westminster Hall debate last week, and I would be interested to hear from the hon. Member for Harrow East on this, one big concern is that those people are waiting months—far too long, in my view—for their biometric residence permits. I hope the Minister will once again take that issue up with the Home Office, because I am still dealing with it weekly with Ukrainian refugees who cannot go on to employment. The hon. Member for Harrow East and other Members across the Chamber are indicating that that remains a problem, so I hope the Minister will take it up on behalf of us all.

Support is being provided, with the Department for Work and Pensions, the education department, the council and the health and social care partnership all helping people based on the cruise ship in Govan as best they can, but the focus needs to be on matching them with suitable long-term accommodation. In September, the Scottish Government introduced the Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund, with up to £50 million available to bring council and empty properties into use and increase housing supply. We need to have a discussion on housing policy across the board, but with a lot of homelessness among Ukrainian refugees and empty properties, something should be done.

Florence Eshalomi: The hon. Member is making a powerful speech on this issue. One issue highlighted in the evidence session where we heard from a number of women, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned, was housing, and especially the cost of housing in London. Can the Government learn anything from what the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has outlined that the Scottish Government are doing in bringing empty properties back into use? My frustration is that we know there are many empty properties that a number of councils could bring back into use, but their funding has been cut drastically for the past 13 years.

Chris Stephens: I will come on to the UK Government's support in that regard, but we should be encouraging local authorities and the Government to look at empty properties. Going past an estate agency in London, I thought I was looking at a premiership transfer fee, not a property price. That is a big problem in London. For those of us who are not London MPs and have to try to find accommodation here, it can be very difficult. The case that there is a specific issue in London has been well made in the debate.

I want to develop the point—made by the hon. Member for Harrow East—that the hostile environment has made it difficult for Ukrainian refugees to move into longer-term rented accommodation. The Immigration Act 2014 introduced a right to rent scheme that obliged landlords to carry out immigration checks on their prospective tenants, but that legislation was found to have a discriminatory impact, making landlords less likely to rent their properties to people from minority groups. As the hon. Member said, there are landlords who are refusing to take Ukrainian refugees. That is another issue that must be looked at.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the issues with the right to rent scheme. There are some additional barriers for Ukrainians—we like to call them temporarily displaced people, because we are hoping they will go back after the war, but the issues of guarantors and deposits are really big ones to overcome. There is a whole range of issues that the Home Office and DLUHC need to look at in order to ensure those people can get into housing.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and again, I hope the Minister will answer those questions. The structure of the UK rental market places power in the hands of landlords, and it undermines any rights that tenants may be afforded under the law.

I turn to the cost of living crisis, which was another point well made by the hon. Member for Harrow East. The last year has placed unprecedented financial pressure on households, with the cost of living crisis playing havoc with people's finances. Many hosts who opened their doors to Ukrainian arrivals last March could not have fully appreciated how bad the crisis would become, with inflation at 10.5% in December last year. From January, the UK Government support available to local councils was cut from £10,500 to £5,900 for each arrival. That seems to be a short-sighted decision. To develop further the point from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, that decision was taken without any consultation with the devolved Administrations, and I hope the Minister will be able to respond on that.

Councils should receive proper funding to provide employment and language support for Ukrainians, which research has shown is crucial. As the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) said, the Local Government Association continues to warn of the growing number of Ukrainians presenting as homeless to councils, particularly the significant rise in those who have arrived under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Data released in February shows that 4,295 Ukrainian households have presented themselves to councils as homeless, which is a 40% increase since November 2022.

The Government cannot simply pass the buck to local authorities. They must ensure sustained funding so that no one who has volunteered to take part in the scheme has to stop. Finally, the uplift in the thank-you payment from £350 to £500 was welcome. However, I hope that the Government will listen to the concerns of the British Red Cross, which says that the increase could come too late and will not always be enough. I look forward to hearing from other Members in this debate.

4.41 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for doing so much to secure this debate. He speaks with authority and conviction on these matters, and I know through my interactions with him that he cares deeply about the plight of those in need. His work on homelessness issues is testament to that, be it the regulation of temporary accommodation or his work with the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness.

There have been several notable contributions towards today's debate. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who is sadly no longer in her place, raised the plight of

the Afghans who were escaping Taliban violence. I agree entirely that too many are being failed, including those who bravely served alongside our armed forces, as the hon. Member for Harrow East also said in his remarks. Too many are still in asylum hotels. This situation is completely unacceptable and must be addressed.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a doughty champion for his constituents in this place—sadly he is not in his place at the minute—spoke about the generosity of local communities and faith groups. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who also does incredible work on the APPG on ending homelessness, spoke about the need for more targeted living costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) spoke knowledgeably about the grave picture Ukrainian families now face in the UK, as well as the need for innovative solutions and the perilous positions of local authority funding. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) raised many significant points in his contribution, including biometric delays and landlords refusing to rent to refugees. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) also raised the important issue of the need for a proper guarantor scheme.

This debate has been well-timed, and following on from the Westminster Hall debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) at the start of this month, it marks the one-year anniversary of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Indeed, as the shadow Minister for homelessness and rough sleeping, it is a huge privilege to be responding on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition on a subject of such significance.

It is heartening to bear witness to the consensus across the Chamber about our moral obligation to the Ukrainian people and, in particular, the more than 165,000 households that have sought refuge in Britain. As I said in Westminster Hall a fortnight ago, the House is united in support for Ukraine and her people. The Opposition's support for the Ukrainian war effort against Putin's brutal aggression is unshakeable. We all have a duty to ensure that Ukraine emerges victorious.

On the word "obligations", for me they are clear. We know our obligations in eastern Europe, and we know we have obligations at home, too, in support of the Ukrainian people. They are two sides of the same coin, and I firmly believe that neglecting our domestic obligations risks undermining us on the international stage. I do not doubt the sincerity of the Government's intentions in respect of Ukrainian refugees—after all, the Homes for Ukraine scheme is the largest refugee scheme ever administered by this country and is testament to the British people's generosity, with many thousands opening up their homes to welcome the most vulnerable, often women and children.

The Government are failing to deliver security and certainty for all Ukrainian households in Britain, however, and it should haunt them—especially the Department—that as of last month, more than 4,000 households were owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty. It should be a mark of shame that 2,985 of those 4,295 households have dependent children within them, and that 735 households are now in temporary accommodation. Most worryingly for the Minister, a majority of the total number of homeless Ukrainian households—2,595 to be precise—are or were previously on the Homes for Ukraine scheme that her Department administers. We must do better.

The Minister cannot rise to the Dispatch Box and claim in good faith that the Government were not forewarned by Opposition Members. At the onset of the war in early 2022, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), asked the Secretary of State if he would put a safety net in place in case of future placement breakdowns. On 14 March 2022, precisely a year ago, she said in this Chamber:

“Surely we are not going to ask people who have fled bombs and bullets to lie homeless on the streets of Britain.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 622.]

No proper answer was forthcoming at the time from the Secretary of State, other than political posturing in response to some eminently sensible questioning.

Here we are today, a year on, and the Government are exposed. Most frustratingly, they are again defined by being inherently reactive. They fail time and again to get ahead of the curve before issues develop, even when they are repeatedly warned that problems could arise or are arising. In this instance, it is yet again local councils the length and breadth of the country that are picking up the mess of Tory short-termism.

In response to a question on placement breakdown a year ago today, the Secretary of State said that

“there may be occasions where relationships break down, and in those circumstances we will be mobilising the support not only of central Government and local government, but of civil society, to ensure that individuals who are here can move on.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 626.]

Naturally, therefore, my question for the Minister is: where is that mobilisation? I would be grateful if she advised the House of what the Department is doing to address the barriers Ukrainian families face in accessing private rented accommodation, and what is being done to assist local authority housing teams who are completely overwhelmed with not just refugees, but other local cohorts.

We must get this right and correct the wrongs with a sense of urgency. Surely the Government are not blind to this growing problem and are therefore not prepared to sit on their hands. For the sake of those who have fled the bombs and bullets of the Russian Federation, I ask the Minister to come back to this place with a credible plan to address homelessness among Ukrainian households—a plan that must involve greater resources for local authorities. If she does so, the Opposition will work with her in good faith, alongside stakeholders beyond this place, such as our key charities and the local councils that are doing their utmost on the frontline in support of our communities.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for calling this very important debate on the anniversary—the actual anniversary—of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

I want to start by saying that the Homes for Ukraine scheme is truly remarkable, and I think we should feel incredibly proud of it as a country. It is thanks to the generosity of the British people that we have been able to welcome over 117,000 Ukrainians under the scheme. When we include the other two schemes, the Ukraine family scheme and Ukraine extension scheme, the total

number of Ukrainians who have arrived safely in the UK is over 166,000. I also want to say that we continue to see arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine scheme at a rate of approximately 900 to 1,100 a week, using the last published data from the fourth quarter.

The plight of the people of Ukraine—those who have left the country and those who have remained to fight for Ukrainian sovereignty—has touched people across the UK since the war began just over a year ago. That is why so many people in all parts of Britain offered, at the drop of a hat, to open their homes as well as their hearts to a Ukrainian guest or family fleeing the barbaric war that Vladimir Putin has been inflicting on their homeland. Since they made it on to UK soil, the wellbeing, safety and treatment of those Ukrainians are things we have all been rightly invested in. The motion put forward today, exactly one year from when the Homes for Ukraine scheme was put in place, reflects just how strong the imperative is to support Ukraine and our Ukrainian guests in their new life on UK soil.

I feel very strongly about this personally, because not only am I the Minister for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but my constituency is one of the centres of the Ukrainian community. Kensington houses the Ukrainian embassy, the Ukrainian social club, the wonderful St Mary's Ukrainian School and the Ukrainian cultural institute. I have stood side by side with my Ukrainian community from before the invasion, and I will be spending Saturday with them and many other Ukrainians. If we look at the numbers in my constituency, we have 423 registered sponsors and 617 recently arrived Ukrainians, including 152 children.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for the points she has highlighted, which demonstrate the generosity of people across our many constituencies who have opened their homes to welcome Ukrainian refugees. One of the things we heard at the evidence session is that, while the women and their children who have come over here are really happy to have been welcomed, a number of them are very much looking forward to going back home and settling back in, and the difficulties they are facing in the interim are making that much more difficult. Does the Minister agree that the Government must redouble their efforts to address the concerns that they and their host families are raising?

Felicity Buchan: I will go on to explain exactly what the Government are doing, but clearly the scheme is evolving. We have already changed it to increase the thank-you payments and to open it up to unaccompanied minors. We are always happy to take on board feedback and to refine it, but I will come on to explain exactly what the Government are doing.

We are doing so much in Ukraine, but we are also doing much here in the UK. This scheme, which is powered entirely by the generosity of the British public, has seen more than 117,000 people arrive in the UK since its launch a year ago. If we include the Ukraine family scheme, we have now helped to find more than 166,000 people a safe and secure home. Those numbers are enormous, and we should never desensitise ourselves to just how many people we have given a new home, helped to start a new life, and offered optimism for life after the conflict. Each of those 166,000 people is somebody removed from the immediate danger of that terrible conflict.

[Felicity Buchan]

A number of Members have mentioned Government money, so let me explain exactly what the Government are doing. As a Government, we have been determined to reciprocate the generosity of the hosts who have come forward with offers of help. To that end, we have committed to provide £1.1 billion to councils through tariff funding and thank-you payments for arrivals in their area, to support guests and sponsors alike. I thank local authorities for the excellent job they have been doing. By way of recognising the hugely generous support of sponsors in the Homes for Ukraine scheme, we have upped the thank-you payments—the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) alluded to that. Those thank-you payments are now £500 a month, once guests have been in the country for over a year. The scheme has also been extended from 12 months to two years. Our No. 1 priority throughout has been to offer stable homes to Ukrainians seeking sanctuary on UK soil. I feel a tremendous sense of pride that we have offered Ukrainians a temporary home, and huge pride in the thousands of people in this country who have taken in a guest.

Chris Stephens: The British Red Cross had some criticisms about the qualifications for the thank-you payments. Will the Minister remind the House of the eligibility requirements to qualify for those thank-you payments, and say whether the Government are considering changing them?

Felicity Buchan: To be eligible for the thank-you payments, someone needs to be a sponsor under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. For the uptick in the thank-you payment, they need to be hosting a Ukrainian who has been in the country for more than 12 months, although they need not have been with that person for more than 12 months.

This debate is about homelessness, so I want to focus in on the numbers. There are cases where relationships between hosts and guests have broken down, but that is not unique to the United Kingdom; such issues exist in many countries across Europe. The Government have tried, wherever possible, to make sure that those who experience that kind of unavoidable scenario have been protected by a safety net. As Members will know, when a sponsorship can no longer continue, councils will support Ukrainians to find new accommodation. Our data shows that by 24 February this year, 2,910 Ukrainian households under the Homes for Ukraine scheme had been owed a homelessness duty by their local authority in England. That number is 4,630 for all Ukrainian arrivals. To put that in context, we have seen more than 166,000 Ukrainian arrivals, so that is a very small percentage. I would also like to clarify that a homelessness duty means a local authority has a duty to prevent or relieve homelessness, so in many cases local authorities will be preventing homelessness before it occurs. Indeed, 2,085 of the approximately 4,600 are recorded as having been prevented or relieved.

I want to come back to temporary accommodation. The latest number is 660 Ukrainian households in temporary accommodation. Again, we do not want Ukrainian households to be in temporary accommodation, but they are in accommodation and it is a small percentage of the overall number of arrivals.

Paula Barker rose—

Felicity Buchan: I will make one final point before giving way. Clearly, we want the numbers to be as low as possible. That is why we are also putting in place for 2023-24 a £150 million fund for which councils across the UK, including the devolved Administrations, will be eligible. That will be principally to relieve homelessness among the Ukrainian community. As local communities are best placed to understand the support they need, they will be able to use the £150 million fund to help all those at risk of homelessness.

Paula Barker: I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being very generous with her time. She spoke about local authorities having an obligation to find Ukrainians homes where there has been a breakdown. Does she agree that local authorities are under enormous pressure not only with the Homes for Ukraine scheme and with arrangements that break down, but from people from local communities who find themselves homeless? Can she tell us a little about what extra resources are being given to very cash-strapped councils that have seen cuts over the last decade or so?

Felicity Buchan: Yes, absolutely. We are making available the £1.1 billion in tariff payments that I alluded to, the £150 million fund specifically for homelessness, and—I am about to come to this—an additional £500 million local authority housing fund, which will provide capital funding directly to English councils in areas facing the most significant housing pressures due in part to recent Ukrainian arrivals. That fund alone is expected to provide up to 4,000 homes by 2024, the vast majority initially for Ukrainians, but approximately 400 to 500 for Afghan families too. Over time, those homes will be for the benefit of local communities, because they will become part of the local authority housing stock.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for giving way. She is being very generous with her time this afternoon. Like many Members, I welcome the new £500 million local authority housing fund for new homes. I referred to my constituency and my local authority. In Lambeth, we have more than 30,000 people on the housing waiting list. The situation is the same not just in London but up and down the country, so 4,000 homes is a small drop in the ocean. Is there anything more the Minister can get the Government and the Department to do to accelerate house building, so we can get the affordable homes that many local authorities desperately need?

Felicity Buchan: The Government are also making available £654 million over the course of the next two years under the homelessness prevention grant. That follows an additional £50 million we made available this year, to run up to £366 million this year. Again, these are large sums of money. We recognise the pressure on housing, in particular in London but across the country. House building is a huge focus of ours. We are making resources available and giving local authorities two years of funding so that they can plan on that basis. Let me draw the hon. Member's attention to the fact that over this three-year spending review we are making £2 billion available for the relief of rough sleeping and homelessness. Again, these are very large numbers. Although we saw an uptick in rough sleeping at the last count, rough-sleeping numbers are still 28% lower than pre-pandemic.

Let me draw the House's attention to our comparative performance on rough sleeping. Every single person sleeping rough is one too many, but in England the rate is five per 100,000 people. That is lower only in two countries—Japan and South Korea. In the US, the rate is 70 per 100,000. There is no question but that one person sleeping rough is too many, but the UK record is comparatively a stronger one. I asked a data provider on homelessness whether there was a country that we should look at for best practice, and I was told that the only two countries with lower numbers are Japan and South Korea.

I am conscious that we have a second debate to move on to, and I want to reply to other Members, so I will talk briefly about Afghans. Resettling Afghans is an incredible focus of Government. I heard a Member mention that there were 11,000 Afghans in bridging accommodation. I want to put on record that the number is 8,350 at the moment, but the Government are incredibly focused on ensuring that we get Afghans into permanent accommodation; that is clearly right for the Afghan families. It has been slightly slower than one would have wanted, partly because many Afghan families are quite large and we just do not have many three, four or five-bedroom properties available. It is a huge focus of Government to locate those properties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East asked why the data that he referred to was voluntary, not mandatory. I want to make it clear that the quarterly data on the statutory homelessness duty is mandatory. It is the monthly management information that is voluntary, but mandatory data is available on a quarterly basis. He also asked about support for jobs; as soon as a Ukrainian arrives in the country, no matter under which scheme, they are eligible for work, education and benefits. I have visited the jobcentre in my constituency, where they are very focused on offering the Ukrainian cohort work coach support and a dedicated enhanced support offer. That is important.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, talked about the Scottish fund of £50 million to renovate existing properties. Our £500 million fund for England allows local authorities to renovate, purchase and build new modular, so there is a lot of flexibility in there.

The hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) asked whether we could have more regular calls to answer questions that arise about the schemes. I am very happy to talk to him individually or as part of a larger group.

Several hon. Members mentioned the private rented sector, in which we are conscious that for some Ukrainians there have been barriers to access such as issues with credit history and the need for deposits or guarantees.

According to the latest Office for National Statistics survey, 17% of Ukrainians are in the private rented sector. Our local authorities receive a tariff of £10,500—it was reduced to £5,900 for arrivals after 1 January—that can be used to help Ukrainians into the private rented sector by way of deposits. I am alive to the issues and alive to the fact that a lot of Ukrainians would like to have their own home, so I am working with local authorities and with the National Residential Landlords Association to focus on how we can overcome the barriers.

I am conscious that quite a few hon. Members wish to move on to the next debate, so I will wrap this one up even though it started only at four minutes past 4. May I finish by thanking every one of the sponsors across the country? They have stepped up in Ukraine's hour of need with their offers of help, and their generosity has offered a lifeline to thousands of people fleeing the ordeal of war. The UK's offer to the people of Ukraine is not static: it will continue to evolve, along with our wraparound support for those who have already relocated to the UK. On the anniversary of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, we should be rightly proud of it, proud of the sponsors and proud of our new Ukrainian guests. I say to them: thank you.

5.12 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, may I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate? I echo the Minister's words of thanks for all those who have acted as hosts to Ukrainian refugees. Just imagine what it must be like for people to leave the country that is their home and their birth right, as bombs and shells land among them, and be forced to flee to a foreign country—it is truly horrific. I congratulate those who have done so.

My hon. Friend the Minister should be cognisant of this: the Government, the Opposition and all of us should be very proud of the schemes that have been set up, but the figures are going in the wrong direction. The threat of homelessness among Ukrainian refugees is growing. It is time we nipped it in the bud, because if we do not take proper action now it will become a major problem. I commend the motion to the House and look forward to further action from the Government accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls upon His Majesty's Government to support Ukrainian refugees living in the United Kingdom, to prevent homelessness amongst this group where possible and ensure it is brief, rare and non-recurrent where it cannot be avoided; and urges His Majesty's Government to work with partner organisations and local authorities to ensure refugees facing and experiencing homelessness are supported during their time living in the UK.

Russian Assets: Seizure

5.13 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to lay before Parliament proposals for the seizure of Russian state assets with the purpose of using such assets to provide support for Ukraine, including the rectifying and rebuilding of war damage brought about by the Russian invasion of that country, and to facilitate the prosecution of war crimes and atrocities; and further calls on the Government to provide progress reports on this policy to the House every six months.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) *rose*—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Before my hon. Friend disappears from the Chamber, may I say that this is a very timely debate? So much of it is connected to the last debate, which I congratulate him on securing, because it feeds into this one: it is all about what has happened to people.

Just before Christmas, I was privileged to visit Ukraine along with the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins). It was an eye-opening trip and it was hugely relevant to today's debate. It shed for me a more personal light on the desperate nature of what was happening to the Ukrainian people, which I was able to witness for myself. We were fortunate enough to go there under the auspices of Siobhan's Trust, a charity based in Scotland and founded by a man called David Fox-Pitt. That allowed us to be close to the frontline, where the charity does its work. It feeds some 4,000 people a day on hot pizza, which they would never get normally and which bucks up their lives. However, most of them live in shelters and in terrible conditions.

All around we saw the devastation inflicted on the villages. Many mines had been scattered, leaving us unable to get off the paths, and in the villages lay dead bodies which, even by then, had not been collected because of the mines. These were people who had brought no harm to anyone—and, by the way, many of them were Russian speakers, which goes to show exactly how ghastly President Putin and his Administration really are. They have caused all these difficulties through the murderous nature of this terrible war brought on the heads of ordinary, normal Ukrainians; that is the state we are in.

Seeing all that devastation made me all the more certain that we must press on and do more to bring these criminals to justice, and make full reparation for the damage and destruction and loss of life that they have caused. I congratulate my own Government and, indeed, the whole House on coming together to do huge things in Ukraine with their support through arms and weapons and training, and I congratulate ordinary individuals outside the House on their generous contributions of money. The fact that we are united demonstrates a very strong sense of purpose to the rest of the world. However, there is more that we must do; we cannot sit back and say that we have done our bit. This is a progressive war and we will be tugged along with it, so it is time that we thought of getting ahead of some of these problems.

I believe that we are being visited today by three Ukrainian MPs: Mr Dmytro Natalukha, whom I met in Kyiv, Ms Maria Mezentseva, and Ms Olena Khomenko. I think they are somewhere in the Public Gallery, although I have not managed to see them yet.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I join the right hon. Gentleman in welcoming the Ukrainian MPs who are with us today. A letter has been sent by 45 Ukrainian MPs to our Prime Minister urging him to do precisely what we want, which is not to freeze assets but to seize them. Given that support from the Ukrainian Parliament, does he not agree that there is now an urgent need for the Government to be bold and to act?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I do agree with the right hon. Lady. We have a lot of Russian assets that are currently frozen, while Ukraine is screaming out for money and support to help all those devastated areas. We can bring the two together, and that is what today's debate is all about.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I am sure the right hon. Member is also aware of allegations that a number of the people sanctioned have moved their money around into trusts to give to their children in order to avoid having their assets taken. Does he agree that the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill should be strengthened to require sanctioned individuals to disclose assets that were owned six months prior to their designation? That would prevent oligarchs such as Roman Abramovich from moving assets around and evading the sanctions.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I entirely agree. I was going to raise that point at the end of my speech, but never mind: this is a shared debate.

I fully back that proposal, which is one of the recommendations that we have to make so that the Government can jump ahead of this. Too often we have been slow and, in the six months that have elapsed, in some of those cases, people have shifted their money around into all sorts of areas. One particular individual—I was going to name him, but I will not do so now—has managed to buy flats through a Cyprus company. His name is not registered, but they own it and the money is lodged there. This sort of stuff is going on and we need to shut it down.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for raising such an important issue. Of course, the largest amount of Russian frozen assets are those of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation. Yesterday, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), said that, if we do not have the right law in place to use those frozen Central Bank assets to pay for Ukraine's reconstruction, we should change the law and test it in the courts. I agree with her; does my right hon. Friend?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is jumping ahead of me, so I will allow that point to stand for a minute.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), whose ten-minute rule Bill was on exactly this subject. There was a lot of logic and sense in that Bill, and we should use it as a baseline for quite a lot of the stuff that needs to happen. As he pointed out when he made his speech on the Bill, in the last year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded 18,358 civilian casualties. He went on to say that 7,031 people had been killed, that 11,327 had been injured, including 177 girls and 221 young boys, that some

12 million people had left Ukraine and 7 million had been displaced internally. When I was there, I saw many people who had had to move to Lviv internally because their homes were no longer habitable, and they were living in terrible conditions.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I want to make a bit of progress, just in case my right hon. Friend is about to tell me what I have got here in my speech. Forgive me if I just get ahead of it, because everyone else will probably do the same.

Let us have look at the costs of the war, which are really what this is all about. Ukraine's death toll is 60,000 and it is rising every day. The cost of reconstruction is now estimated to be between \$750 billion and \$1 trillion and rising, and these might be conservative estimates because the damage is still not fully accounted for. Since the beginning of the invasion, the UK has provided £2.3 billion in military assistance and another £220 million in humanitarian aid. The UK has frozen billions of pounds in Russian assets under sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation has reported that £18 billion of assets owned by individuals and entities associated with the regime have been frozen since the beginning of the war, but some estimates suggest that more than £40 billion could yet be frozen and this is the point we want to get to.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I, too, have just got back from Ukraine. I was there a couple of weeks ago and saw the immense devastation across the country, specifically in those areas that were Russian held. Importantly, this Government looked at plans to repurpose assets last July but they still have not done it. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is now imperative for the Government to look at repurposing those state assets in order to start rebuilding and restructuring the country and offering that important aid?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady.

I want to talk about what Russian state assets are frozen and what could be frozen. It is important to note that, in Congress right now, they are already discussing this—I spoke to someone there just 24 hours ago—and in Canada, they are seriously talking about it. European Parliaments are also discussing the matter. This is a moment for us to give a lead on this and help to shape the nature of it, as we have a conference coming up shortly and I wonder whether that might be the place to lead on this matter.

According to the Bank of Russia's own 2021 annual report, £26 billion of Russian state reserves are in the United Kingdom and, on a wider level, western Governments have now frozen some \$350 billion of Russian central bank reserves in response to the invasion. There is yet more that they could do. The combined value of frozen UK properties belonging to Russian oligarchs is at least £2 billion. Funds frozen under the UK sanctions regime are passive, and that is the problem. Those funds would enable us to finance the rebuilding of Ukraine and to show Russian dirty money the door. This is the key: we send the message and we help with

reparations. Several countries, including Canada, as I said earlier, and the EU are already on to this process and I urge our Government to help to give a lead on this.

Dame Margaret Hodge: May I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the Canadians have gone even further? My understanding is that they have already started taking action by pursuing the forfeiture of US\$26 million from Roman Abramovich's holding in Granite Capital Holdings Ltd. If Canada can do it, surely we can, too.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with the right hon. Lady. If countries do this individually, it will allow terrible regimes to dodge their money around from one financial centre to another, as some will not have done it. This has to be done in one go by all the developed world's major centres, otherwise it will end up with disputes and problems. I applaud Canada for starting, but we need the City of London, New York, Zurich and all the other major centres to be serious about making sure this cannot happen and these assets will always be seized.

I can tell the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), that we understand the underlying problem, but my point is that the issues are not insuperable.

Vicky Ford: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent point, but I draw his attention to another source of funds. There are increasing stories that the Wagner Group may be using gold stolen from Sudan's gold mines to fund part of its atrocious activities in Ukraine. The Wagner Group is obviously guilty of atrocities not only in Sudan but elsewhere in the Sahel and Africa. There are stories today that the Italian Defence Minister is directly linking the Wagner Group to the increase of small boat migrants in Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as well as taking action on Russian assets, we should urgently proscribe the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, of course. It is a disgusting organisation led by a disgusting individual carrying out disgusting atrocities in Russia. It is also using slave labour in some of these mines. Of course the Wagner Group must be proscribed, as should the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other such organisations. We should be at the forefront of this, not lagging behind.

The Government's general belief is that seizing these central bank reserves would violate Russia's sovereign immunity and would therefore be a breach of international law. If we think about it, Putin has redefined international crime and is now hiding behind international law. It is time for us to come together to make the modifications. That is the key.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does he agree that there may be something to learn from the Iraq war? Iraqi assets under Saddam Hussein's rule were used—there was a formal legal process under which people could apply for those assets to rebuild infrastructure that had been damaged in Kuwait and elsewhere. I wonder whether

[Bob Seely]

the Government, when they answer the debate today, would say whether they are considering a similar process—a formal legal process under which Russian assets could be used to finance construction work in Ukraine.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I would happily welcome that. It is a very good idea.

Ultimately, the war Putin initiated on Ukraine must now be punished in a variety of ways. It is unwarranted aggression against another country, and it therefore changes how international law should be applied. We should readjust and redefine international law to the new reality that Putin's invasion has brought about. The old order is now broken, and we need to redefine it to make sure that the lesson for any other oligarch, future leader or demagogue is that they can never again hide behind these rules.

Although international law is always evolving, we need to recognise the exceptional nature of Russia's aggression and conduct in Ukraine, as that is critical to what we do next. Russia's aggression and invasion are breaches of the most fundamental principles of international law and order. Russia is aware of this breach but has not stopped its conduct, and it continues to threaten international security and peace. That unprecedented conduct creates a need for all Governments in the west to amend their laws together to deter other states. These amendments should use specific and limited criteria to preserve sovereign immunity in all cases. It is possible to do both without hiding behind the idea that sovereign immunity is an absolute that cannot be breached. Putin has breached it, and in future that should be the rule.

The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill could and should be strengthened to enable the seizure of undisclosed assets—that is the key. We already have a vehicle. It is wholly possible to make that difference, and to make it quite quickly. I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that I hope she will give that serious consideration, as it is really important.

As we know, sanctions evasion is already an offence. Embedding a new “disclosure or lose it” principle would go a long way to ensuring that sanctioned oligarchs are no longer able to conceal their dirty money here with impunity. That would help us to clean up what became a bad reputation for the City of London, whereby much of that ill-gotten money was hiding here, in one of the leading nations of the free world, and we did little or nothing to stop that.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I get a bit frustrated when I keep hearing the Government talking about how many people we are sanctioning. There is no point in sanctioning people unless we enforce those sanctions. I find it difficult to comprehend that so far we have fined only two firms in this country. I am sure that there are many more sanctions busters in the UK than have thus far been revealed. It is important that that is not allowed to proceed with impunity, is it not?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Of course, I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. Interestingly, if we manage to criminalise the failure to disclose sanctioned assets, we are halfway there on his point, because they cannot then escape. If we prove that sanctions evasion

is taking place, this can be the basis for asset recovery in due course; we would then have a reason why we should be doing this, not just because of the criminal purpose, but for the fact that we would actually be able to gain funds.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Is he as worried as I am about this new trick that the Treasury is performing called “general licences”? There are now whole categories of spending where the Treasury is basically issuing carte blanche to oligarchs to spend what they like and, worse, it is refusing to reveal that framework to us here in this House.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman; this is beginning to sound like one of those “golden visas”. It was golden in description, but dirty and leaden in reality, and I think this is where we are again. We are going to find us all in agreement—

Bob Seely: Is the problem we have not shown, for example, in Abramovich's allegedly shifting about £7 billion of assets out of the country the day before? What he did was perfectly legal, because I believe this was shifted to the United Arab Emirates or somewhere else in the middle east and his lawyers knew about it. In the United States, there is now talk about going after the law firms and the accountancy firms that help the oligarchs and that have helped these individuals to move their money around just before they have been sanctioned or to find ways around sanctions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way here is to go after these middlemen and women? We have not done that, but the problem is that what these people are doing is not necessarily illegal—they are shifting the money before it can be sanctioned, and money is a movable asset, unlike a house in Belgrave Square.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree. These individuals, Abramovich and others, may want this to be done, but somebody has to do it for them, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to follow the chain down, because we have to capture all the individuals down the chain, not just the one at the top. That is the key, because without those, this does not happen. He rightly says that, to avoid the sanctions, three weeks before the war began Abramovich was busy restructuring radically his assets. I believe that my hon. Friend is right to say that between £4 billion and £7 billion was squirreled away as a result, and we were not able to do anything about it. But we should have been ahead of the game on that one.

Dame Margaret Hodge: The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent contribution. I want to say one thing: I do not think the Government are using their current powers as effectively as they could on this issue. Under section 11 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, the powers can be used against somebody “associated with” the person sanctioned. If that is the case and I have read the legislation right, does he agree that the Government could have stopped Abramovich giving all this to his young children and could have sanctioned them because they were associated with Abramovich himself?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am beginning to feel that I am making a collective speech, because the right hon. Lady's point is down here in my notes. It is better made by her than me, but I fully agree with her as a result.

We could have got ahead of this—that is the point, as the example of Abramovich shows. Many others have drifted off, so the right hon. Lady is absolutely right: we needed to be quicker and more determined. Now, we have to sustain our determination to flush all this out while we have the opportunity. I always sense a little resistance. When we call it out, the Government say, “Ooh, we don't know. We've got lots on our plate and we are doing lots of things,” but this is the time to act.

Siobhain McDonagh: The right hon. Gentleman was kind enough to participate in my Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall the other day. This is not just about oligarchs; it is about companies that are sanctions busting. I am aware of a Belarusian company that imports goods through Russia in order to undermine and take customers from a business in my constituency. Does he agree that, whether it is an oligarch or a business, the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation and the Foreign Office should be adaptable and able to react to rogue actors, who will do everything possible to avoid the sanctions regime?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I must say, the hon. Lady's debate was fascinating. She demonstrated that by our failure to follow this course, a UK company is essentially sanctioned because it is unable to get payment. The measures bounce back at us and honest, decent companies find themselves trapped by the failure to square the circle of the process and get everyone all along the chain. It was a brilliant debate, and I congratulate her on raising the subject on behalf of her constituents.

The Government should introduce new legislation to allow the seizure of already-frozen assets that are linked to criminality. The Russian Government have a huge amount of money of course, but many oligarchs are guilty of benefiting financially from war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine, so we should activate new legislation. Under such a mechanism, an enforcement authority such as the National Crime Agency could bring proceedings in a UK court to have property belonging to a sanctioned person involved in a gross violation of international human rights law or international humanitarian law confiscated without compensation, so that the frozen property can be used to fund reparations. That is the key.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): That is a really important point. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I know that Ukrainian parliamentarians, including those from the Rada who are in the Gallery, are desperate to repair and reconstruct their country. The air raid early warning system in Ukraine is broken—only 12% of the country is covered. They need reparations to be able to wage war and to reconstruct their country.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I obviously completely agree.

If we did this, we could have tougher sanctions. A recent example involved Eugene Tenenbaum, a close associate of Roman Abramovich—I am told that “Abramovich” is the correct pronunciation—and former Chelsea

football club director, who was given permission by the Treasury to sell his Surrey mansion for £16 million a month after the Government designated him for UK sanctions and froze all his assets. How did that happen? Why did that happen? Who is not talking to someone else to tell them what they are doing? We are letting stuff slip through because we are not being serious about implementing measures properly.

I could give plenty of other examples. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the boss of the Wagner Group, is deeply involved in another current row about aircraft leased by western companies to Russia that were seized after sanctions were imposed. The Russians are refusing to pay reparations or hand the aircraft back. Huge amounts of money are available to these people. I have a list, but will not go through all the names, because I realise that many others want to speak.

Putin's brutal invasion has now entered its second year. The Government must amplify their efforts. They have done a great deal, and I congratulate them on much of it, but much more is needed. The Government need to get right down into this issue and make sure that we have a plan for reparation and rebuilding of Ukraine. Let us start with the dirty money—that is the key. We may yet have to give more money, and so may America, but let us start where the bill lands first: with those who are responsible for this brutal invasion of Ukraine. The Ukrainians are a peaceful and decent people whose lives have been turned upside down. Families have been destroyed or have had to flee, and many young men and women are now having to go to the frontline for the first time as soldiers and put their lives on the line, standing for the freedom of their country. We must seize those assets wherever appropriate and ensure that Russia is held to account. As I said earlier, there is much to say “Well done” to the Government for, but there is also much more that needs to be done.

I will leave hon. Members with this simple thought: as we come together across the House, let us also try to work out how we can bring all the other western Governments together in this action. To do it by ourselves will, I recognise, be a slight problem, but if we could get the US Congress, the Canadian Parliament and the European Union to engage on this, then we would have something that would frighten the Russians completely and give us the tools to finish this particular job.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): As hon. Members have recognised, we are honoured to have been joined by colleagues from the Ukrainian Rada who are in the Gallery this afternoon. We welcome you; we salute you and the courage of your country in your fight for democracy.

I must just gently say to hon. Members that the winding-up speeches will start at 6.30 pm.

5.41 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I welcome the speech by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), which I thought was excellent. I will supply three further thoughts and set the context for the scale of the task of Ukrainian reconstruction. I am glad the Government have offered to host the June conference for reconstruction finance, following on from a member of conferences in Lugano.

[Liam Byrne]

It is worth setting out for the House the sheer scale of the finance we need to mobilise, which is why the right hon. Gentleman is correct to say that we must start by seizing Russian assets now. Frankly, we will need to provide an enormous amount of money to our Ukrainian colleagues. Ukrainian GDP has been hit by about 45%; the World Bank thinks its budget deficit this year will be something like \$38 billion. As many who have been there know, Ukraine has very high inflation and therefore very high interest rates; perhaps one third of businesses have stopped operations, 14 million people have left their homes, 6 million have gone abroad, there has been huge educational disruption for the next generation of Ukrainians and about half the energy infrastructure has been knocked out.

This has been a moment where the Bretton Woods institutions have really stepped up. Between the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, something like \$27 billion has been supplied this year. Those Bretton Woods institutions offer us one of the most efficient and effective routes for providing what could be, on current estimates, a \$750 billion bill to rebuild the great country of Ukraine. As chair of the parliamentary network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, I am delighted that we have just launched the Ukraine chapter of the network. I am also delighted that at our global parliamentary forum, at the beginning of the spring meetings in Washington in April, we will have a special session focused on reconstruction finance for Ukraine.

However, \$750 billion is a big number. Capitalising those kinds of loans could take \$150 billion-worth of equity. That is why seizing, let us say, \$300 billion of Russian bank reserves frozen abroad will be incredibly important in helping to supply that money.

Alex Sobel: With the reconstruction conference taking place in London on 21 and 22 June, does my right hon. Friend not think it is important for us to involve the IMF and World Bank in that conference and ensure that we have a rounded package for Ukraine, rather than working in silos or isolation?

Liam Byrne: It is crucial that we do that, and the spring meetings in Washington should provide a springboard, but the most efficient way of surging the necessary money into Ukraine is through the Bretton Woods institutions that we set up in 1944 to finance post-war reconstruction. We did it before—let us try it again.

My second point, having set the stage and set out some of the numbers, follows on from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. We now have to identify the legal strategy for turning this idea into a reality. All of us in this House are frustrated that the Government—and, indeed, Governments around the world—are, we feel, dragging their feet when it comes to putting in place the necessary laws to move from freezing to seizing. There are probably three components that we need to shift into place: there needs to be action at the United Nations; there needs to be action to set up the tribunal to prosecute Russia for the crime of aggression; and then we need to implement the ten-minute rule Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), which would create the legal framework for action.

Bob Seely *rose—*

Liam Byrne: I will say a word about each of those things after I have given way to the hon. Gentleman.

Bob Seely: Does the right hon. Gentleman have a preferred option? Although it will be legally possible to seize Russian state assets—that has arguably been done before, so there is precedent—is he concerned about the seizure of private assets? I am tempted to say that those are legal. They are seized assets from a dirty period of Russian history, so I think one could say that they are not illegal, but how legal they are is another matter. If we are seizing oligarchs' assets, how can we do so legally without setting a more tricky precedent?

Liam Byrne: I will come to that now. There are three things that we will need to do. It is not just about private wealth; it is about public wealth—the assets of the Russian central bank. We know that \$300 billion was held abroad. We know where about \$30 billion of it is, and that money has been frozen. To seize that money, we will need to do a couple of things.

First, we will need to bring the world together at the United Nations to pass a resolution that revokes the doctrine of immunity for central banks when there has been a clear violation of the United Nations charter. I am under no illusions; we will not get 100%, but by getting a significant number of nations to sign up to that resolution, we begin to change the parameters of international law. That means that domestic law, when we move it, will be in a much safer legal space. Indeed, many international lawyers would say that seizing those assets is a legitimate countermeasure, but if there is a UN resolution, we have begun to change the concept of what is protected by immunity—such as central bank assets—and what is not.

Secondly, we then have to ensure that we do not fall foul of the European convention on human rights, particularly the first protocol, which enshrines the right to the enjoyment of assets. We have to ensure that there is no way that the Russian Government can be considered a victim. The safest way we can do that is to move quickly, as President Zelensky has proposed, to begin prosecuting Russia for the crime of aggression. If we have a UN resolution that has begun to revoke the concept of immunity in the case of aggression, and a tribunal that is prosecuting Russia for the crime of aggression, we will have begun to change fundamentally the context of international law.

Bob Seely: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is about the most expert person here when it comes to the workings of the international financial institutions and so on. Does he expect or think that we will be able to seize oligarch assets as part of that process? If so, do we have any idea how we will proceed down that route, or are we looking only at Russian state assets? At some point, all the oligarchs close to Putin will get their billions back.

Liam Byrne: I think that we can use the same tactics to seize private and public assets, but I am conscious that we have to change the context and parameters of international law first. That is how we maximise the safety of domestic legislation, which has to be the third step. We in this House are lucky that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has set out precisely how to do that in his ten-minute rule Bill.

Crucially, we need to ensure that the State Immunity Act 1978, which gives immunity to central banks, is revoked or at least conditioned in a way that allow laws to be presented here so that we in Parliament can order the seizure, forfeiture and repurposing of assets.

My final point is a little more short term, meaning now. If we are to maximise the assets that we seize and repurpose for the reconstruction of Ukraine, we have to get serious about sanctions enforcement. Right now, frankly, we are not. There will be a lot more money available if we stop the nonsense that is going on in the dark at the moment. The truth is that sanctions enforcement in this country today is the proverbial riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, we have been told that as of October 2022, £18.4 billion-worth of Russian assets have been frozen in this country. We then learned from the scandal exposed by openDemocracy that the Treasury has been issuing licences like confetti, even to warlords such as Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner Group—in his case, to fly English lawyers to St Petersburg to prosecute an English journalist in an English court in order to silence him because he was writing the stories that triggered the sanctions against Prigozhin in the first place. What a nonsense!

As I began to dig into this, much worse was revealed. In the last Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation report, it was revealed that the Treasury is no longer issuing licences to individuals one by one to authorise specific expenditure; it is now issuing general licences that authorise an entire category of spending. In fact, 33 general licences were issued last year, so I naturally asked what the value of those general licences totalled. I was told on 15 February in a parliamentary answer:

“The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) does not disclose data from specific licences it has granted under UK sanctions regimes.”

When the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury came to the House on 25 January, we asked him whether, if he cannot tell us what the total value of the licences is, he could at least tell us what the licences were issued for. He said he could not tell us that because

“there is a delegated framework”

and that these decisions

“are routinely taken by senior civil servants.”—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 1014.]

I then asked what this delegated framework was and whether we in this House might have a look at it. I first tried a parliamentary question. The answer came back on 8 February:

“There are currently no plans to publish the delegation framework.”

I then had to try a freedom of information request, and I have it here in my hand. It came back to me on 9 March, and it says:

“we can confirm that HM Treasury does hold information within the scope of your request.

The information we have identified...we believe may engage the exemption provided for by section 35(1)(a)—formulation or development of Government policy.”

We now have a situation where Ministers are saying that it is the civil servants’ job, and the civil servants are saying that it is advice to Ministers. For that reason, we cannot get to what this delegated framework looks like.

I then asked whether they could at least tell us how many people we have busted for sanctions evasion. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation confessed that there were 147 reports of a breach last year, but when I asked the Minister for Security how many criminal investigations had resulted from that, he said that he could not answer

“For reasons of operational security”.

I went back to the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation report to double-check, and of 147 reports of a breach, there have been a grand total of two monetary fines, both to fintech companies.

So there we have it: £18 billion frozen and licences issued like confetti in a secret regime that Ministers say is down to civil servants and civil servants say is actually advice to Ministers. Despite this flagrant abuse—and we know the scale of it, because the *Financial Times* told us that \$250 million has been laundered by the Wagner Group—we have just two fines that total £86,000. Well, £86,000 in fines is not going to do much to help us rebuild Ukraine. I ask the Minister on the Front Bench to explain to us how she is going to do an awful lot better than that.

Sanctions enforcement in this country stinks to high heaven, and what concerns me most is the culture of secrecy around it. Many of us in this House have been around long enough to know that such a culture is never a recipe for good public policy. We in this House have to be realistic about the scale of finance that is needed; maximise the use of our Bretton Woods institutions; and move internationally and domestically, together with our allies, to change the parameters of international law and maximise the safety and security of domestic legislation that we pass here. But let us move now to send a clear signal from the UK—the home of the rule of law—that this is not going to be a safe haven for sanctions evasion. We are going to send that clear message by getting tough, and getting tough now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): If we are going to get everybody in, we are going to have to have a self-denying ordinance of about six minutes.

5.55 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who raises very important issues. The truth is that we probably will not be able to implement what we are discussing until the Russian invasion is defeated, but it is absolutely right that we start to plan now for when—I hope and pray—that happens. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who raises matters that are of great concern right across the House. He does a service by doing so.

In December 2018, I visited the city of Mariupol. At that time, it was under blockade from the sea due to Russian enforcement preventing sea traffic arriving into the Sea of Azov. Nevertheless, it was a thriving port city. It is estimated that 90% of that city was either damaged or razed to the ground in the course of the sustained bombardment by Russian forces. Across Ukraine, an estimated 144,000 houses have been destroyed, and that number is increasing every day that we speak.

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

As has been pointed out, the estimated cost of reconstruction in Ukraine last year was around \$750 billion. That figure is probably going to reach \$1 trillion, and possibly rise even further. That is for reconstruction; on top of that, we have the question of compensation for those who have lost loved ones, the loss of economic infrastructure and jobs, and the damage to education and health. Those are huge sums, and it is only right that those responsible—the Russian state—should be made to pay.

Work has been done on this question, and I pay tribute to the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and, in particular, Dr Azeem Ibrahim, who in conjunction with other international experts has been developing a plan for how we should go about seeking reparations from the Russian state. There are some legal precedents. Two have been identified, the first being the 1946 Paris agreement on reparation, which provided for the seizure of German public and private property in the aftermath of the second world war. As my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) mentioned, a more recent precedent was the establishment of the Kuwait compensation fund under the UN compensation commission, which used the proceeds of the Iraqi oil industry to pay out compensation totalling something like \$52 billion to 1.5 million claimants.

That was established with the agreement of the UN Security Council, and unless there is a change to the composition of the Security Council, it seems unlikely that it is going to agree in this case. However, we need to fashion international multilateral agreements, and as has already been demonstrated, there is a substantial majority in the United Nations General Assembly that would support not only condemnation of Russia for its aggression, but the payment of compensation in due course.

Legal processes are under way. The International Criminal Court is investigating war crimes and the individuals responsible, but as we know, the ICC is prevented from bringing prosecutions in absentia, and Heads of State enjoy immunity. We need a mechanism that will hold to account those ultimately responsible for this aggression: the Heads of the Government of the Russian Federation. For that reason, I am pleased that the UK Government are now working with others on the establishment of a special tribunal to bring a prosecution for the crime of aggression, and I join others in paying tribute to our friends, in particular Maria Mezentsseva of the Rada, who have been touring around to persuade different supportive countries of the case for bringing a prosecution.

As has been pointed out, the funds available for the payment of reparation in the first instance belong to the Russian state; the estimated frozen funds of the Russian central bank total something like \$300 billion. On top of that, the Russian state enjoys oil revenues, and it is possible to consider whether some kind of levy could be placed on that. There are then the assets of institutions associated with the Russian state, such as Gazprom, Rosneft and Rosatom, but things will need to go beyond that, and the debate so far has rightly focused on whether we can address those assets held by private individuals and oligarchs.

Alex Sobel: The right hon. Gentleman is just coming on to the point I was going to make. There is some contention about assets held by private individuals and about their getting caught up in a very long legal process, but that is not the case with state assets and the assets of state-owned companies that he has just talked about, which we can address now. He talked earlier about reconstruction, but we do not need to wait until the war is finished. Many liberated areas need reconstruction now, and many other projects need to be financed. That work needs to happen now, not after the war has finished.

Sir John Whittingdale: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think the legal process for seizing the assets of Russian state institutions will be complicated, but it is certainly more feasible than addressing those of private individuals. That is not to say that we do not need to move to do so, but it will be legally much more complex.

Many of the oligarchs hold immense wealth and assets in western countries, and they do so at the behest of the Russian Government. No oligarch is able to hold enormous sums of wealth and maintain their position in Russia, unless it is with the agreement of the Russian Government. A number of them are known as wallets, which means they are simply taking care of the wealth of Mr Putin and others at the senior levels of the Russian Government. It is right that we should address that, but we have to accept that this country has a proud history of respect for property rights and the rule of law, and we have also seen the extent to which lawyers will pursue cases on behalf of those individuals. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) mentioned strategic lawsuits against public participation, and we have already seen examples of that.

I do not in any way underestimate the complexity. This will be an unprecedented legal measure, but it is necessary because, as has already been said, the devastation wreaked in Ukraine has to be put right, and it is only proper that that should be done by those responsible, who are the Russian Government. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green that that will need international agreement. It cannot be done by us alone, but it is right that we start to look now at seeking that multilateral agreement among all the countries where these assets are held and to prepare for the day when we can start to make Russia pay for what it has done.

6.3 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Billions of sanctioned Russian assets lie dormant. There is at least £26 billion of Russian bank reserves frozen in the UK. It is blood money that Putin has secured on the backs of the bodies of his own people, the people of Grozny and the people of Ukraine. For years, Putin was preparing for sanctions. He expected what we, along with our allies, have done, but there are many countries facilitating the evasion of sanctions.

Putin has been given ample time to back down—over a year, in fact—and he has chosen not to do so. This may not be a state of total war for Russia, but it is for Ukraine and its people. In reality, we must accept the truth that Putin will not back down, because doing so would be the end of his rule in Moscow. Simply, Ukraine must win, which is why this debate is important.

The Government have billions of pounds-worth of Russian assets at their disposal, which could be used to support Ukraine now. It is pointless to keep them frozen and perhaps use them to help to rebuild Ukraine in a few months or years, or perhaps even longer, if Ukraine no longer exists. The priority must be to help Ukraine now, not in a hypothetical future. There are reports that China is considering backing Russia with lethal aid, which would further prolong the conflict and make it even more difficult for the brave Ukrainians.

Since the start of the invasion, the UK has provided more than £2 billion in military assistance, which has made a huge difference, particularly at the beginning of the war. If £26 billion of Russian assets were repurposed for military and humanitarian assistance, that would make an even greater difference. The next set of assets are the private, undisclosed ones; it is likely that Russian oligarchs own billions of pounds-worth of hidden and undeclared assets here in the UK.

The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, if amended correctly, will help authorities to track down those assets. A policy of “disclose it or lose it” would make oligarchs think again about using our country to hide their dirty money. For that to work, however, the Bill needs to be strengthened, because it is too easy for oligarchs to evade sanctions. Many had weeks to prepare and hide their assets, and authorities were already on the back foot due to the years, or even decades, that oligarchs had had to do as they please.

The Bill is long overdue and I urge the Government to seize the opportunity to get it right. It is not acceptable to leave loopholes in sanctions that have already been used to sue British journalists. The United States Congress has granted the Department of Justice the ability to transfer certain seized assets to Ukraine, and it successfully did so last month. Our Government need to do the same.

We all want and need to see Ukraine win this war, because it is fighting for our shared values. Freedom and democracy must win, and it is our duty to do our lot to help. That is why I support the motion before the House today. Let us seize Russian assets here to help Ukraine win.

After hearing the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), I simply say that it is about time that the Government got their act together. In local government, when powers are delegated, the framework is also delegated and people are held to account. If what is needed is not being delivered, the Government need to change something so that it is delivered. Are we in control? Who is running this country? We are certainly not doing our bit on this issue. We want to, but we are not achieving it, so the Government must get their act together—and soon.

6.8 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): This war must see Ukraine and its people emerge victorious—there are no plausible alternatives—but there is still a gap as to how to pay for Ukraine’s reconstruction in the short term and once the war is won. There is no doubt that the west will do its part when it comes to it, but a question of fairness, or the lack thereof, remains. It cannot be right for the burden of reconstruction to fall solely on the shoulders of western taxpayers, especially as estimates for it are astronomically high. As has been

said, the suggestions on the ground in Ukraine are that it will cost around \$750 billion, and that figure will only continue to grow as Russian armed forces and mercenaries continue their indiscriminate destruction.

The aggressor in this case—the Russian Federation—its political and military leadership, and, yes, its people must pay the price. They must pay the price for disregarding, and in fact smashing, the rules and norms of the post-1945 world order that had guaranteed the peace in Europe for so long. What Russia started by invading Georgia in 2008, it continued in Crimea, Donbas and then wider Ukraine, so there must be no more free passes for Russia to invade, brutalise and plunder. To appease Putin would only encourage him to greater brutality.

Our current freezing sanctions are robust, wide-ranging and necessary, but in the light of Russia’s barbarism, they do not go far enough. There remains some debate as to the quantity of assets frozen here in the UK—assets of the Russian state and of individuals, and we have had a discussion about that this evening—but regardless of the specific value of those frozen assets in the UK, it is clear that frozen assets worldwide could form the lion’s share of future support to Ukraine, including for the vital reconstruction of people’s homes and national infrastructure.

Seizure, however, requires both political courage and will, and that has been exhibited by our Canadian allies. I advise my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) that the Canadians are doing more than talking about it; they are acting on it. In June last year, lawmakers in Ottawa empowered the relevant Canadian Ministers to approach their Attorney General to apply to the courts to forfeit assets—assets that had already been frozen—for the benefit of Ukraine. The legislation builds in important safeguards to protect rights to property, including that any person who appears to have an interest in the frozen assets may be heard by the court. None the less, seizures are now under way specifically in relation to an estimated \$26 million held by Granite Capital Holdings, a company owned by the sanctioned oligarch Roman Abramovich. Discussions are, I understand, ongoing about how the proceeds should be used and distributed in Ukraine, be that directly through the Ukrainian state or by select non-governmental organisations, but the fact of seizure is now a legal reality in a friendly nation with a legal system similar to our own.

Conversations I have had with lawmakers in other allied nations, such as the US, indicate that they are also considering how to make seizures legally viable and feasible in their own jurisdictions, and media reports suggest that this is also the case in capitals across the EU, such as Tallinn. We should be doing likewise here in the UK as well. Not to do so, I believe, risks our finding ourselves in the morally dubious political situation of handing back frozen assets to Russia and to sanctioned individuals, or it could lead to individual national deals with sanctioned people that could put us out of lockstep with our allies.

One of the many lessons of the last year since the renewed invasion is how important it is to present a relentlessly united front to Russia. On the day that we were privileged to welcome President Zelensky here for his outstanding address, the Prime Minister made positive and welcome comments about the necessity of asset

[Mr Jonathan Djanogly]

seizures, as I note did the Leader of the Opposition. Now is the time to follow that up with firm action. As of today, I am confident in predicting that such action would have the overwhelming support of this House, and I think we have seen the cross-party support here today. Where there is political will, there is always a way, as our fellow Canadian parliamentarians have demonstrated. I strongly welcome this debate, and I urge the Government to set out a practical and effective plan for frozen Russian assets to be seized and repurposed to Ukraine's benefit.

6.13 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I want to speak briefly very much in support of the ten-minute rule Bill of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). It seems perfectly obvious to me that the money is there for winning the war. Money has been given in weapons, tanks and other methods, but we also need to invest strongly in building the peace, rebuilding Ukraine and making sure that people who have absolutely no blame in this conflict are not left living their lives in ruins.

On 10 December 2022, President Zelensky said:

"Bakhmut, Soledar, Maryinka, Kreminka. For a long time, there is no living place left on the land of these areas that have not been damaged by shells and fire".

Investment must be put into rebuilding all of the cities in Ukraine that have been damaged—the bridges, the infrastructure and the things that make life possible. A significant investment is also required in demining and the removal of ordnance, without which none of the construction can safely go ahead. That will be a significant task that the Government must invest in. I am conscious that occasionally somewhere in Glasgow we unearth a world war two bomb, so given the intensity of shelling that has happened in Ukraine, there has to be significant investment in demining to allow things to go ahead.

This is logical when we recognise that so much of this money is right here; it is in bank accounts in this country. In some cases, assets have been frozen, but we must find a way of reclaiming that money, which does not belong to the oligarchs in the first place. This is money they have plundered and do not deserve, and it must be returned to the Ukrainian people to allow them to rebuild.

As I have said many times in this place, the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill requires strengthening. There are more things it could do to tackle many aspects of money laundering that allow that money to flow through the United Kingdom. Transparency International UK has mentioned several areas where it could be tightened. It could prevent UK companies from being used to provide a veneer of legitimacy for money launderers by ensuring transparency over shareholders, members and partners. That is still not the case in the Bill. It could improve the Companies House register of accuracy by enabling Companies House to verify and publish shareholder information. It could catch rogue operators by providing Companies House with powers to check the documentation of "know your customer" checks carried out by third-party agents. Many of those third-party agents are where the problem lies with verification. There must also be a credible deterrent to money laundering. We must resource agencies that have to do the important work of checking

and interrogation to ensure that economic crimes do not continue to go unpunished, and to have a far more effective system to prevent the UK from being seen as the location for economic crime that it has sadly become.

I want to talk a little about Scottish limited partnerships, which have long been used to give many of these companies a veneer of respectability. They have been implicated in economic crime through the Panama papers, and many other scandals over the years, and they are still being used, not for the purposes for which they were originally set up 100 years ago, but for hiding wealth. *The Ferret* news agency in Scotland has found that, of the 631 SLPs created last year, only three were formed by residents of Scotland. That should set off an alarm bell. It says to me that they are not being used by people in Scotland for the purposes for which they were historically needed. Eighty per cent. of those SLPs were formed in just three addresses in central Edinburgh. These are not real companies carrying out real work; it is happening in plain sight.

The Ferret found that 38 firms registered with MYCO Works, one of the Edinburgh companies, name Matthew Bradley in their accounts. He was sanctioned by the United Nations after a fraud investigation into SLPs. He has links to Serhiy Kurchenko, a Ukrainian billionaire who fled to Russia after it was alleged that he failed to pay tax. He was sanctioned by the UK in 2020 and the UK Government alleged at that time that he

"facilitated the supply of oil from Russia companies to their Crimea-based subsidiaries in the first year of the Russian occupied Crimea, enabling the Russian companies to bypass EU sanctions."

In April this year, the EU sanctioned Kurchenko for aiding Russia's attacks on Ukraine and, in 2017, after he fled Ukraine, prosecutors moved to seize his company's assets as part of the

"criminal group organised by Serhiy Kurchenko."

Bradley was named as the ultimate beneficial owner of UMH Group, which was in the company's structure documents. So a web of firms is being set up under SLPs by those means through the UK, which the UK Government could be doing a hell of a lot more to clamp down on. They are allowing that sanctions busting and veneer of respectability, and it is exploiting the people of Russia as well as the people of Ukraine. I urge the Government to take the issue much more seriously and to amend the Bill to shut down all those loopholes.

6.18 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a great delight to take part in this debate. I feel as if I spend more time than I ever thought I would with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) these days, and I have friends who are bit disturbed by it. But he probably has friends who are a bit disturbed by it as well. The important point is that, if the Russian ambassador, or for that matter the Ukrainian ambassador, were to look at this debate, they might think that there are not that many people in this Chamber, but that is not because of a lack of resolution by the whole membership of this House, which is determined to ensure that we will do everything in our power—we will make sure that the Government of this country and the whole of this country will do everything in their power—to ensure that Putin does not win this illegal, criminal war that he is engaged in and has been engaged, to my mind, since 2014, not just since last year.

I am going to talk about three things: sanctions, seizing assets and who pays. On sanctions, it is often said by Ministers—I am going to be nice to Ministers because I like this Minister, and because I want them to do something and sometimes being rude about them does not work—that we are doing more sanctioning than we have ever done before. I just gently say that that is not true. We had a more comprehensive sanctions regime over Iran—not at the moment, but formerly—than we presently do over Russia. So we have to consider further sanctioning, which has to happen. It is true we did not sanction any individuals in relation to Iran and we are doing more individuals in relation to Russia, but it is the whole Russian economy that we need to debilitate so it cannot win the war.

The Minister knows that I worry we are not sanctioning enough individuals. Sometimes it feels as if the Government feel that job is done. It is not. As several hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), have said, there is an issue about sanctions busting. I am certain, although I do not have proof, that sanctions busting is going on in the UK every single day of every week and has been ever since we started this process. For a start, we gave plenty of warning. People have referred to Roman Abramovich. I recall the then Prime Minister saying at Prime Minister's questions that he had been sanctioned, but it turned out that he had not. That was a pretty good signal that he was about to be sanctioned. A couple of weeks later, because of stuff I was able to reveal about what the Home Office had been saying about Abramovich for several years, he was then sanctioned. By that time, however, yet more money had been siphoned off to another part of the world. It is true that the proceeds of the £2.3 billion sale of Chelsea football club, which happened in May last year, will eventually go Ukraine, but it has taken a very long time to put that in place. I know Mr Penrose is engaged in that and is eager to make that happen as fast as possible—incidentally, it will dwarf the contribution the UK has already made—but that contribution was not forced on Abramovich by law. In the end, he decided to agree to it. So that does not really quite count.

Treasury licences have been referred to. They are giving carte blanche to many individuals to circumvent the sanctions regime. There are undoubtedly enablers in the City of London, the same enablers we have known for years, who have enabled the dirty money to swirl around in the UK economy. There are the lawyers, the very posh law firms with very thick carpets and very thick marble walls that are doubtless refurbished every two years on the back of money that was stolen from the Russian people by people who should have been sanctioned. There are estate agents, banks and countless individuals who, without any thought to the morality of the situation, are still happy to enable sanctions busting. My worry is that there is hardly anybody in Government tracking down whether that is happening or not. Has anybody turned up to any estate agent office in Mayfair and said, “Are you checking whether any of these individuals you are buying and selling from are sanctioned individuals?” Has anybody done any investigations? I very much doubt it.

Liam Byrne: As ever, my hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. I was shocked to hear that suspicious activity reports are not triggering enforcement actions

for sanctions busting either. Is that not an argument for broadening the suspicious activity report regime, so that it does include people like estate agents? Surely, we should be using that as evidence to trigger prosecutions.

Sir Chris Bryant: Absolutely. I do not know whether my right hon. Friend has ever tried to open a bank account in the last few years, but it is almost impossible for a British Member of Parliament. I suspect it is much easier for a Russian oligarch to do so than it would be for anybody else. I really hope the Minister will take away the view of the whole House that we have to get serious about cracking down on sanctions busting in the UK.

I like a Magnum when I go to the cinema. It still upsets me that Unilever thinks that Magnums are essential in Russia, which is why it is still doing business there. Unilever should be pulling out completely from Russia. The Russians should forgo their Magnums—or is it Magna? I do not know what the plural is. For that matter, Infosys should not be operating in Russia, either.

I worry that some of our allied countries are providing a very safe haven for sanctions busting, including the United Arab Emirates. In the last year, it has become a complete paradise for dirty Russian oligarch money. If countries such as the UAE want to remain allies with us, they need to think very carefully. They may say, “Oh, but it's only money. We are only doing what you did for years.” I hope that we in the UK are now learning the lesson of what happens when we give out golden visas to people just because they have lots of money, and do not ask any questions. It ends up biting you on the backside.

On seizing assets, I am sick and tired of the pearl-clutchers. People say, “Oh, I know. It's really, really important. We really have to do something, but you know, Mr Bryant, you don't understand. It's terribly, terribly hard.” I am sorry, but where there is a will, there is a way. People want to wave sovereign immunity around all over the place, but what about the sovereign immunity of Ukraine? That was guaranteed by Putin personally, and the UK and other countries when we all signed up to the Budapest accord. Several years later, it turned out that we did not mean it quite as categorically as we stated on that piece of paper. There must surely come a time when sovereign immunity has to be waived because otherwise there is complete impunity when one country invades another. In the end, that is simply inviting countries to invade other countries.

I understand that the seizure of oligarchs' assets is not easy. Prigozhin's mother has just managed to win an appeal, as I understand it. But it would be much easier if there were an amendment to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, as several Members have mentioned already in this debate, to make it an offence for a sanctioned individual not to reveal all their assets. That would certainly make it easier for us to do that.

On state assets, I do not believe that sovereign immunity can be absolute. It is preposterous that we are sitting here, watching Canada and wondering how it will go there. When was it ever the British attitude to watch what is happening across the other side of the ocean? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, said, it would be much easier for us to take legal action if, first, we had a United Nations resolution

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

and, secondly, we set up a special war crimes tribunal to consider the matter of a war of aggression. Unfortunately, although the British delegation at the Nuremberg war trials said that a war of aggression was the ultimate war crime, that has not thus far been so determined. It would certainly assist us if we were able to get that. It would also assist us if we were to amend the State Immunity Act 1978.

I come to the fundamental point: everyone knows that Ukraine will have to be reconstructed. Cathedrals; schools; libraries; hospitals; people's homes; hundreds and hundreds of apartment buildings have been completely destroyed; roads turned into craters; bridges destroyed—sometimes by the Ukrainians to prevent the Russians further invading; electricity pylons. The whole system is completely in need of reconstruction.

In the end, there are only three options for who will pay for that. The people of Ukraine cannot afford it, and it is immoral to say that they should pay. There are Ukraine's allies, or rather their taxpayers around the world. I am absolutely certain that, as individuals, many people in the UK—including in my constituency—will want to make a personal contribution. The British taxpayer has already made contributions through the British Government. But in the end, we are talking about \$1 trillion-worth of reconstruction costs already. To be honest, the £23 billion-worth of Russian state assets sitting in British banks at the moment will only touch the sides. However, if we add the €350 billion-worth sitting in European banks, along with the amounts in Canada, Australia, the USA and all the other countries in the world, we might just be able to make a dent.

Anybody from Ukraine who is watching this debate will know that we all stand four-square behind them. We want to do so not only in our words, but in our deeds. I beg, I implore the Government: you do not have to use my Bill. My Bill is completely irrelevant; it is just a way of teasing you along to do the right thing. I know you want to do the right thing—I mean the Government, not you, Mr Deputy Speaker, although you probably want to do the right thing as well. Whenever the Government are prepared to table the legislation, we all stand ready to vote it through as swiftly as we can.

6.30 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to wind up for the SNP in this very constructive debate. We support the motion. I commend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for moving it; I can hardly do anything but support it, because I called for the same thing from this spot on 26 April last year and reiterated that call on 25 May and 22 September.

The SNP has long been pushing for a Marshall fund to aid the reconstruction of Ukraine. We have also been pushing for greater financial transparency within the UK's financial sector. That is a good thing in and of itself, but the crisis in Ukraine has brought an urgency to the need to deal with the UK's long-standing problem of dirty money. We want to see action, so I hope the Minister is taking good note of the constructive pressure she is feeling today. We want to see more, better, faster and broader action than we have seen to date.

I appreciate that it is difficult. I am a financial services lawyer—if we go back far enough—so I know that we are dealing with some of the slippiest, best advised and best resourced people in the world, who are very able to exploit loopholes wherever they exist, but there is a unanimity here and there is a will. I implore the Minister to do better than we have seen to date.

The London laundromat has been a long-standing problem for national security. My predecessor in this role was Stephen Gethins, who is well known to many colleagues as the former Member for North East Fife and who is now a professor of international relations at the University of St Andrews. He has put it very well:

“For years we have turned a blind eye to Putin's dirty money, propaganda and influence in our democracy. Those who called out the corruption were badged as anti-Russian when it was the Russians who were Putin's first victims. It is a shame that many are only paying attention to his crimes after such grave events. I hope that real action will be taken. After years of inaction we owe the people of Ukraine and Putin's other victims at least that.”

As we have heard in the many excellent speeches this afternoon, the scale of reconstruction required in Ukraine is vast. Estimates vary from €600 billion to upwards of €1 trillion, but who can calculate it while the conflict is ongoing? It is going to be a major financial exercise in reconstruction, but the wider moral principle is surely that it should be Russian dirty money that pays. If Russian dirty money is good enough to be sequestered, it is good enough to be requisitioned for reconstruction.

This has been a constructive debate. Let me give some examples of how other states are dealing with the issue. Estonia's Government have declared a blueprint for the legal seizure of frozen Russian assets. The Frozen Assets Repurposing Bill is working its way through the Canadian Parliament. There is a Swiss law on asset recovery. Today, the European Parliament is debating precisely how to tackle the issue. I associate myself with other hon. Members' comments that we need an internationally co-ordinated effort, because any loopholes that are allowed to exist will be exploited. I particularly commend the actions of the Italian state: the Guardia di Finanza has made strong strides in seizing assets.

There is a wider lesson for us all. I very much appreciate the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) about properly resourcing the new financial transparency regime that is working its way through this House. The Guardia di Finanza proves that if there is a strong and properly resourced domestic enforcement mechanism, we will see better results; I strongly believe that the Government could take that on board. Likewise, the Dutch Parliament has already created a trust fund that will be funded by assets in due course, and is working out how it can legally seize them. There is a huge willingness to see the Government do more and do better.

Let me end with a couple of, I hope, constructive points. First, we want to see a wider coalition: we have already seen a coalition in support of Ukraine, but we also need to see a coalition in support of these legal measures. I should be grateful for an assurance from the Minister that the overseas territories will be very much part of the UK's new regime in this regard, because we are seeing pretty significant evidence that they are being exploited through these loopholes. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I am glad to hear some support from the Conservative Benches.

My second point raises what is, perhaps, a broader issue. A number of the UK's allies are actively engaged in assisting the Russian state and the oligarchs themselves to get around these systems, and they will be the source of the loopholes that will be exploited. Surely the UK is in a diplomatic position to put considerable pressure on those allies.

Having made those two points, and having referred to the unanimity we have seen today, I add my own salutations to our Ukrainian colleagues. There is a coalition of the willing in this House, and I hope the Government can rise to the opportunity that it presents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition spokesman.

6.35 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his role in securing the debate, and I thank Members on both sides of the House for their expert and powerful contributions. I refer not least to the expertise and campaigning of Members on our own side, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant)—whose Bill I welcome—my right hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer).

Let me also welcome our friends from the Rada of Ukraine. We are delighted that they are here with us today, and I hope they have observed that while there is much political division across the House on many other issues, one issue on which the House and indeed the country are absolutely united is the need for us to stand four-square behind Ukraine and ensure that Putin loses this war. Indeed, there has been a great deal of unity on the matters discussed today. I, like others, saw with my own eyes the damage to infrastructure outside Kyiv last September—here I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I saw the bridges that had been destroyed, and the devastation of residential buildings and key economic infrastructure. It was absolutely shocking, and it is clear that a huge amount needs to be done.

We in the Opposition have been consistent in our support for the Government in relation to expansion of the UK's sanctions regime, and we have worked constructively with the Government and with Committees to ensure that it is as strong as possible. That said, we have serious concerns about the pace at which the Government continue to act, the glaring gaps in designations and enforcement, and the apparent reluctance on repurposing frozen Russian state assets. We have heard very clearly about the huge economic needs. The Kyiv School of Economics, working in conjunction with the National Bank of Ukraine, estimates that as of December the damage to residential and non-residential infrastructure amounted to \$137.8 billion, while the vice-president of the World Bank suggested that the total reconstruction cost would be between \$525 billion and \$630 billion. In this year alone, Ukraine's national budget has a \$38 billion gap.

Moreover, before reconstruction can begin it will be necessary to clear the huge number of mines and unexploded ordnance that have been scattered across

much of the country, including agricultural land. The other day I spoke to a representative of the HALO Trust, who told me that it would take more than a month for every day of fighting in Ukraine to clear the ground of unexploded ordnance and munitions. That means that if the war stopped today, it would take more than 30 years and billions of dollars to make many areas safe for habitation and economic activity to begin again.

We welcome what the Government have said about the reconstruction conference, and we will work across the House to ensure that it is a success. We also fully support the establishment of a legal process to provide for the seizure of Russian state assets and their repurposing to support the recovery and long-term reconstruction of Ukraine. As we have heard, at least £26 billion worth of Russian bank reserves are currently frozen in the UK. Imagine the good that that money could do if it were reappropriated for reconstruction.

We—indeed, many Members on both sides of the House—have been pressing the Government on this matter for the last year. I have been through a list of Government responses. In July last year, they told us that they were

“considering all options on assets that have been seized and whether they can contribute towards the reconstruction of Ukraine.”

In October, they told us that they were

“considering all options on the seizure of Russian-linked assets”.

In December, they told us that they were

“looking at legally robust mechanisms to seize assets to fund reconstruction.”

In February they signed the UK-Ukraine declaration of unity, which included the phrase

“We will pursue all lawful routes to ensure that Russian assets are made available in support of Ukraine's reconstruction, in line with international law.”

We heard today in oral questions that the House should be assured that the Government were taking this seriously. I very much like the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), but the fact is that there has been no commensurate plan, no announcement and no clear action taken to move this forward over the last year. I hope that she can give us some reassurance today that there will be movement on this issue. She has heard the views of the House. As we have heard, the EU, the USA, Canada and other states are all moving in the right direction, so why aren't we?

We have heard many different suggestions today, but I was confused to hear the Foreign Secretary say that there was no precedent for seizing assets. Of course, there is the precedent of the first Gulf war in Iraq, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said earlier. The UN Compensation Commission was established and took in \$52.4 billion-worth of Iraqi oil revenues, after 1.5 million claims from Kuwait, to pay for reconstruction and reparations in relation to Kuwait. There is much legal advice out there about the potential to have temporary counter-measures, which would perhaps deal with some of the legal objections. There is a lot of scholarly thought out there about that. There is also the question of whether we could temporarily manage assets to provide resources for reconstruction. We also support the establishment of a special tribunal on the crime of aggression, and that could lead to further institutions and processes to allow for the seizure and repurposing of assets.

[Stephen Doughty]

The UN General Assembly has already voted on this, adopting a resolution during the emergency special session on Ukraine in November 2022 that called for Russia to pay reparations for its action against Ukraine. We have heard what many countries are doing, including the United States. The US Administration presented six proposals in April last year that would allow for

“the forfeiture of property linked to Russian kleptocracy, allow the government to use the proceeds to support Ukraine, and further strengthen related law enforcement tools”.

We have heard about what the European Union is doing, with the directive on asset recovery and confiscation and the suggestion to add the violation of EU sanctions to the list of EU-wide crimes. We have heard about the debate going on in the European Parliament today. We have also heard much about Canada, whose Budget Implementation Act—Bill C-19—contained numerous provisions. Part 5 of that Act made amendments to the Special Economic Measures Act, the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act—the Magnitsky law there—and the Seized Property Management Act. So the United States, the European Union, Canada and others are moving forward, yet this Government have yet to set out a clear plan here.

It has also been pointed out today that our regime is failing and fraying in other ways. I have mentioned the UK-Ukraine declaration of unity, which states:

“We will also ensure, consistent with our legal systems, that Russia has no access to the assets we have frozen or immobilised until it ends, once and for all, its violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

But, given the very real concerns about the granting of licences that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill has raised on a number of occasions, I want to ask the Minister whether that is still the case. If we are issuing general licences, with minimal ministerial oversight, that can allow assets to be quietly siphoned off with virtually no transparency on why they are being granted, is that consistent with the statement that the UK Government signed up to?

I have asked a series of questions on these issues as well, but scant information has been provided in response. What did become clear was that the FCDO appears to be playing no role in this. I shall quote the answer to one of the questions I had an answer to. It stated:

“While the FCDO works closely with other departments across government on sanctions, under sanctions regulations, the FCDO has no formal role in the issue of licences by the UK Government for (A) Russia and (B) Belarus. The FCDO does not maintain a central record of contacts from other departments on those issues.”

That is quite extraordinary. This is a serious issue that the Government need to look at urgently. Where is the oversight? Where is the enforcement? We would introduce proper ministerial oversight of issuing these licences and a joined-up approach across Government to ensure that every Department was working in lockstep on these issues to prevent those who seek to skirt our sanctions regime from doing so.

The question of enforcement has been raised a number of times. Across the UK’s full sanctions regime, which covers thousands of individuals and relates to countries including Iran, Belarus and Syria, only eight fines have been issued in the last four years, according to the publicly available figures from the Office of Financial

Sanctions Implementation. Despite the fact that 1,471 Russian individuals and 169 entities are subject to UK sanctions under the Russia regime, no monetary penalties have been issued against any individual or company for sanctions breaches under that regime since the start of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, since 24 February 2022, only two monetary penalties have been issued for breaches, neither of which was under the Russia regime.

We must contrast that with the United States, which has issued 17 penalties since the start of the war, with a value exceeding \$43 million. Four of those penalties were specifically linked to the regime relating to Ukraine, with a value of over \$25 million. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said, people will clearly be abusing the regimes. How is it that the United States is finding people and we are not?

There are clearly areas on which we agree with the Government—we all want to see the most robust regime, and we stand united with them in support of Ukraine—but we must seize, not just freeze, these assets, we must close the loopholes in our regime, and we must ensure the tightest enforcement against all those who would seek to aid and abet Putin’s illegal and barbarous war in Ukraine.

6.45 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important debate. I am grateful to him and other hon. Members for the points they have raised, which I will do my best to address this evening. As ever, I will make sure that we write to Members if I am not able to pick up any specific points.

As we move into the second year of Putin’s illegal and brutal war, I am grateful for the ongoing unity shown by hon. Members on both sides of the House and for the shared determination to support President Zelensky and all Ukrainians until they prevail. It is an honour to have some of our Ukrainian friends in the Gallery today.

Before addressing the seizure of Russian assets, I underline the magnitude of the UK’s response to Putin’s invasion. Although I hear the challenge of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) on the quantum of sanctions to date, I will set out what we have done so far. The UK alone has sanctioned more than 1,500 individuals and entities with a net worth of \$145 billion, and we have frozen more than £18 billion-worth of Russian assets—assets that Putin now cannot use to fund his war machine. We have also introduced an unprecedented number of trade measures, which have led to a 99% reduction in imports of goods from Russia and a 77% reduction in exports of UK goods to Russia. All those measures have been determined to restrict Putin’s ability to fund and sustain his illegal war. The measures represent the most severe sanctions ever imposed on Russia. The package of sanctions to date includes asset freezes on 23 major Russian banks, with global assets worth \$960 billion—that is 80% of Russia’s banking sector—the prohibition of Sberbank from clearing and the removal of 10 banks from SWIFT.

I remind the House that we have sanctioned the Wagner Group in its entirety, and its leader, Prigozhin. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford

(Vicky Ford) will know that, although I cannot comment on whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription, her comments have been noted.

Liam Byrne: The *Financial Times* has revealed that the Wagner Group has channelled \$250 million into its organisation through sanctions evasion. Is that not evidence that the sanctions implemented against the Wagner Group are not working? What information can the Minister supply to persuade the House that the enforcement regime is actually effective?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will come back to that in a moment.

The right hon. Gentleman also set out, with his usual articulateness, a very clear pathway through which the UN and the international community might work together to seize Russian state assets. I hope I can reassure him that we will continue to work at the UN with all like-minded countries to address the asset seizure challenge.

The latest package of internationally co-ordinated sanctions and trade sanctions was introduced to mark the anniversary of the invasion on 24 February, and it includes export bans on every known item Russia has used on the battlefield. This combined package of sanctions has been carefully constructed with our allies to cripple Putin's supply chains, to limit his ability to finance his war and to target those who are propping up his regime. It serves as a stark reminder to Russia and any other would-be hostile actors of the cost of flagrantly assaulting the democracy, sovereignty and territorial integrity of another nation.

As Members have highlighted in the debate, the reconstruction of Ukraine is absolutely at the top of the international agenda, while we continue to support Ukraine to defend its country. In September, the World Bank estimated a cost of \$349 billion to rebuild Ukraine—a figure that has been rising every day since. Indeed, colleagues have highlighted recent assessments with figures of about \$750 billion. Those are monumental sums to consider in respect of the reparations that will be needed.

The UK Government will continue to take a leading role in determining how to assist in this long-term reconstruction challenge. In June, we will be co-hosting the 2023 Ukraine recovery conference in London, alongside the Ukrainian Government. Together, we will mobilise public and private funds to ensure that Ukraine gets the reconstruction investment it needs.

We also remain committed to continuing our direct support for Ukraine. To date, we have helped more than 13 million Ukrainians affected by the war, providing them with £220 million of vital humanitarian assistance, delivered through the United Nations, the Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations. We will continue to work alongside our Ukrainian friends in support of their military defence for as long as they need us to do so.

The key issue of seizing Russian assets to fund Ukrainian reconstruction is one that the Government are extremely focused on, and we are in close discussions with friends and allies. The Government remain clear that Russia must be made to pay for the harm it has caused in its illegal war in Ukraine, in line with international law. The Prime Minister made that clear in the London declaration he signed with President Zelensky during his recent visit to the UK and in the G7 leaders'

statement on 24 February. We have been 100% clear: Putin must pay. We are working in the FCDO, in consultation with other Whitehall Departments and our G7 partners, to review all lawful options to make frozen Russian assets available for rebuilding Ukraine.

Sir Chris Bryant: We have a motion before us on the Order Paper, and I hope that the Government will not oppose it and that we will not have a Division at the end of the debate. The Government will therefore be agreeing the following:

"That this House calls on the Government to lay before Parliament proposals for the seizure of Russian state assets with the purpose of using such assets to provide support for Ukraine".

So it is a legitimate question to ask: when will the Government be introducing the proposals that they are calling on themselves to introduce?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. If I may, I will continue with my speech before I run out of time. I hope to give him some assurance on his question.

We are continuing to engage with think-tanks, lawyers and Members of the House, and those they are working with, to ensure that we test every available option in detail. I reiterate that I am genuinely grateful to all colleagues for their interventions and proposals to help us work on these challenges, and we are meeting them regularly.

I want to be clear that the Government believe that we should develop the power for frozen assets to be used to rebuild Ukraine, to ensure that we can achieve that practically and lawfully. Given that Ukraine is fighting for its future and the principles of the UN charter and international law, it would be an own goal for Ukraine's allies to risk being seen to act inconsistently with domestic and international law in their approach to seizing Russian assets.

Mr Djanogly: Is there not also a concern that if we do not act with our allies to move ahead on this principle, and we all start doing our own deals on releasing assets, that would be very damaging for the wall of sanctions? Indeed, the Ukrainians have said that they would be very much against individual deals.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for setting out one of the important issues that we are making sure we work on as effectively as possible. We are working very closely with our allies on the handling of seized Russian assets, and we will continue to do so. Let us be clear: our international partners face the same challenge. No country has yet found a legally tested solution. The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) highlighted that Canada is testing the first seizure proposals and we are watching closely. I reassure the House that as progress is made by individual international partners, we will be right alongside them in considering how the UK can find solutions here too. Of course, as has been set out by colleagues, many proposals need UN leadership, and we will keep on driving that coalition.

In the meantime, we have made it clear that, consistent with our legal systems, Russia will have no access to the assets we have frozen or immobilised until it ends, once and for all, its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia will not get a single euro, dollar or pound back until that is realised.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

Colleagues have raised questions about the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill. It will sit alongside the National Security Bill, the Online Safety Bill and the forthcoming economic crime and fraud strategy. It will bear down on criminals who abuse our open economy by reforming Companies House to prevent abuses of limited partnerships; there will also be reforms to target more effectively information sharing to tackle money laundering. The right hon. Member for Barking is right about the effectiveness of section 11 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and it is used regularly.

I know that right hon. and hon. Members will be disappointed that I cannot speak more fully about sanctions enforcement and OFSI, as these are matters for His Majesty's Treasury, but I know they will continue to raise their concerns directly and I have heard them today.

Stephen Doughty: I have to press the Minister on this point. Will she and the Treasury together publish a list of the people who have been granted licences and exemptions under the sanctions regime, how many enforcement actions have been taken, and what those actions have delivered in terms of monetary value?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will take note of that request and make sure that Treasury officials get back to the hon. Gentleman.

I draw the House's attention to the economic deterrence initiative, which was set out yesterday in the integrated review refresh. Funded with £50 million over two years, it will improve our sanctions implementation and enforcement. That will ensure that we can maximise the impact of all our sanctions, including by cracking down on sanctions evasion.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) highlighted the oil price cap, which was brought in at the start of the year at \$60. We know it is already having an effect, but the Price Cap Coalition is committed to reviewing shortly whether it is both diminishing Russian revenues and supporting energy market stability as effectively as it can.

The package of sanctions we have co-ordinated with our allies has inflicted a severe cost on Putin for his aggressive ambition and serves as a warning to all would-be aggressors. During President Zelensky's recent visit to the UK, he and the Prime Minister made it clear that Ukraine and the UK remain the closest of friends. They committed to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to defeat Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion, and to pursue all lawful routes to ensure that Russian assets are made available to support Ukraine's reconstruction, and that is what we will do.

6.57 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to all who took part in the debate. What we have shown here, including to all our Ukrainian friends, is the unity across the House on this issue, and that we will remain united until the invasion is over and Ukraine has received the money it needs.

A summary of what Members have said today, for my right hon. Friend the Minister, is this: we have to do more. We have to do more to implement existing sanctions, and then we have to do more to start the process of enabling ourselves to seize those assets—first Government assets, then private assets—and work in concert with our friends.

I end with a simple message to our friends in Ukraine and those who are here today—it is a huge privilege for us to have them here. We will stay with them until this is over. It will be over when the reparations have been paid, when Ukraine is rebuilt and restructured, and when the Ukrainians have their freedom again. Slava Ukraini, heroyam slava!

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to lay before Parliament proposals for the seizure of Russian state assets with the purpose of using such assets to provide support for Ukraine, including the rectifying and rebuilding of war damage brought about by the Russian invasion of that country, and to facilitate the prosecution of war crimes and atrocities; and further calls on the Government to provide progress reports on this policy to the House every six months.

PETITIONS

Cost of living

6.58 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of my constituency, covering Harborne, Quinton, Edgbaston and Bartley Green, to urge that greater action be taken to address the cost of living crisis. Thirty-five people have signed the petition, and I give special thanks to Elaine Hook, Alison Thompson, and Peter and Pat Leadbeter, for the brilliant work they have done to support people struggling locally.

The petitioners

"request the House of Commons to urge the Government to take urgent action that will see:

1. An extension of the windfall tax to cover the costs of capping energy rates to stop bills going up this winter.
2. Insulate homes to help families save money on their energy bills now and in the long-term.
3. Support homeowners to protect their homes by bringing interest rates down on mortgages.
4. Protect those who pay rent to ensure a sudden spike in rent prices does not lead to an increase in homelessness."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Birmingham, Edgbaston, including Harborne, Quinton and Bartley Green.

Declares that the cost of living has reached crisis point, with the consequence being an increase in homelessness and fellow constituents being left to go cold and hungry.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to take urgent action that will see:

1. *An extension of the windfall tax to cover the costs of capping energy rates to stop bills going up this winter.*
 2. *Insulate homes to help families save money on their energy bills now and in the long-term.*
 3. *Support homeowners to protect their homes by bringing interest rates down on mortgages.*
 4. *Protect those who pay rent to ensure a sudden spike in rent prices does not lead to an increase in homelessness.*
- And the petitioners remain etc.]*

Tax wealth

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I rise to present a petition alongside a corresponding online petition, signed by more than 38,000 people, demanding action on wealth taxes. It is totally wrong that the wealthy get away with paying lower tax rates on their wealth than everybody else has to pay on the wages they earn from going out to work day in, day out. Scrapping that tax advantage could easily fund a proper pay rise for nurses, teachers and the other key workers who the Government were calling heroes not too long ago.

The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to scrap this tax advantage for the wealthy and to instead tax wealth fairly therefore allowing for pay rises for public sector workers through the reallocation of funds.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares a fair tax system would ensure that those with the broadest shoulders pay the most; further declares that income from wealth is taxed at lower rates than regular income; further notes that simply equalising Capital Gains Tax rates with income tax rates would raise £17 billion per year that could easily fund an inflation-matching pay rise for the nurses, teachers, ambulance drivers and all public sector workers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to scrap this tax advantage for the wealthy and to instead tax wealth fairly therefore allowing for pay rises for public sector workers through the reallocation of funds.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002813]

Cost of living support for leukaemia patients

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I rise to present a petition calling for cost of living support for leukaemia patients. I thank Leukaemia Care for highlighting how

the significant financial challenges that leukaemia patients already face following diagnosis have been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. That is something patients face on top of the physical and emotional toll of the disease. I therefore urge the Government to consider carefully the demands of the petitioners.

The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that all leukaemia patients are provided with: a national hospital travel fund, a continued level of support provided by the Energy Price Guarantee until after April 2023 and wider additional financial support such as discounts/tariffs on bills.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that more needs to be done to support leukaemia patients with the rising cost of living; further that patients have access to hospital travel nationwide so as to end the unfair postcode lottery of support; further that the current level of support with energy prices stays put, especially for leukaemia patients as they suffer a serious financial impact after diagnosis which is currently being exacerbated by the cost of living crisis; and further that wider support is made available in light of this disproportionate impact on leukaemia patients.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that all leukaemia patients are provided with: a national hospital travel fund, a continued level of support provided by the Energy Price Guarantee until after April 2023 and wider additional financial support such as discounts/tariffs on bills.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002814]

Proscribed Psychedelic Drugs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

7.2 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): This is the first occasion that the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and I have had to debate an element of his new portfolio in public, a subject to which I have devoted much of my time over the past five years. I want to put him at his ease. I of all people know he has one of the toughest jobs in Government—I suspect his willingness to go out and bat for the Government on the most difficult of wickets is one reason he was chosen for these responsibilities—and I do not want to draw him on to ground where he has to defend the indefensible. Instead, I will use most of this brief debate to make the case as best I can for his positive intervention in a narrow but profoundly important and potentially positive part of his responsibilities.

I do not want or expect an answer this evening; these matters demand careful consideration. There will shortly be an application to the Backbench Business Committee, supported by more than a score of colleagues from across the House, for time for a fuller consideration. I hope by the time that debate is secured we can enjoy the news that this Minister is taking the available opportunities of his very tough policy inheritance.

Since the United States—directed by the FBI of Harry Anslinger under J. Edgar Hoover—corralled the world into agreeing a 1961 UN convention on comprehensive narcotic prohibition, global drug policy has a decent claim to being the greatest public policy failure since 1945. The casualties and costs, certainly, are cumulatively much greater than those of any conflict of the period.

In the future, historians will look back on the policy in stunned wonderment that the US, having had a decade and a half of prohibition of alcohol in its own country, thought it sensible, less than 30 years later, to press the rest of the world to prohibit everything but alcohol and tobacco, and expect a different outcome. This time, the scale was truly epic, affecting the entire world and everything that humans had come to use to make themselves feel better, driven by the same moral certainty that underpinned the temperance movement decades earlier. The scale of the cost and the toll of the casualties should have been entirely predictable. So great have been the investment in that policy around the world, the moral high ground of the political class, and the blood price paid by state security forces around the world, that it seems that only retired leaders engage properly in this first-order debate, and, based on their experience, now challenge the assumptions upon which they governed.

Today's leaders face the particular problem of explaining to their electorates why the certainties on which self-evidently failing policies are based are in fact a mirage. The black-and-white simplicities that lend themselves to ease of political communication do not exist. They must also begin to put in place an alternative and more effective answer to reduce the harm done to humanity by narcotics than the simplicity of blanket prohibition. That will be complex and difficult, and will require communication skills and moral courage of an exceptional order. That global reordering will be for the future.

The sooner we get there, the sooner the carnage can stop and the cost and benefits of our policy can be measured properly with a degree of disinterested academic rigour so absent over the past half century.

What policymakers can do immediately is to address the most obvious and damaging consequences of prohibition: access to medicine being lost and denied. Forgone medical treatment is just one element of the cost of blanket narcotic prohibition, but it is very great once we understand the treatments that we have denied ourselves amid the moral panic underpinning prohibition. For no class of drugs is that urgent repair more needed than for the psychedelics.

First, the opportunity for a major step change in mental health treatment is real. We are not talking here about simply improving the treatment of symptoms of mental ill health. We have the opportunity, with the psychedelic class of compounds, to make a step change in mental health treatment and, with a proper regard for the actual risks involved, drive access to medicines while facilitating the collection of data for their efficacy in the real world.

As Ministers around the world are now becoming aware, psychedelics, including psilocybin, are being investigated and found to have promising application as facilitators of psychotherapy for the treatment of the most debilitating and devastating mental health conditions suffered by people around the world. Unlike the treatment options that are currently available to patients, psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy does not foster dependence. It treats the underlying causes of mental ill health rather than simply covering the symptoms through emotional blunting, unlike selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—antidepressants—on which patients can come to rely for decades, and to which they currently have no real alternative.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) is properly concerned about freeing people from the overuse and dependence on those treatments. When I sought his support for my application to the Backbench Business Committee, he cautioned me to stay my enthusiasm until we had solved that problem as the first priority. But that misses the point that assisted psychotherapy can give patients back their lives, allowing them to escape antidepressants in the first place by helping them to form and enjoy satisfying relationships with other people; to return to and thrive at work or study; to contribute fully to society; or even better, to help them to confront their fear of death and cope with end of life. It really is revolutionary and has the potential to dramatically improve the lives of millions of our fellow citizens. We must do both.

Addressing the missed opportunity of treatment over half a century will help address the miserable dependence of too many on SSRIs. It would be untenable for the Government to keep barriers to cancer research, for example. That should also be the case for psychedelics given their promise for mental health.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Does he have any estimate of the number of people living with treatment-resistant depression in the UK and what the cost could be to the economy of not rescheduling psilocybin as he proposes?

Crispin Blunt: The cost is enormous if one considers that there are 1.2 million people suffering with depression and the number of those people who go on to commit suicide who could be treated. Approximately one third of armed servicemen who have come back from active service in Afghanistan and Iraq are beyond treatment for the trauma they have sustained. Of all people, to whom does the state owe a debt? The cost of this issue is enormous.

How did we get into this position? There was 20 years of documented medical research prior to the scientific blackout that followed the stringent terms of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. How did this awareness of the therapeutic potential of psychedelics not weigh in the balance to avoid the situation we are in today, where they are so tightly controlled that even researchers at world-class UK universities struggle to access them for research purposes? It is an unhappy accident of history that Government regulation of controlled drugs in the 1970s has impacted the public in ways that were completely unforeseen.

These extremely safe drugs are in the most stringently controlled class and schedule, based not on any historical or contemporary assessment of their toxicity or dangers, but simply because there were no submissions made to British or American regulators of medical products containing psilocybin before the instatement of the UN single convention through the UK's Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. They were therefore assumed to be worthless for medicine. The historical use of cocaine and heroin in medicine prior to 1971 accounts for why those drugs, with far higher dangers and awful potential for abuse, reside in a lower schedule than the much more benign psilocybin and its fellow psychedelics.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are in danger of taking psilocybin into the same arena as medical cannabis, where the medical profession blames politicians and politicians blame the medical profession, and rather than all looking for obstacles, we should be looking for constructive solutions?

Crispin Blunt: I have learned so much with the hon. Gentleman over the last five years, as well as with the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who has joined this debate with personal testimony and the most enormous strength; I know that she has had conversations with the Minister, and I thank him for making time for these conversations and for learning.

It is the Minister to whom, inevitably, we now look for positive leadership in this space. That is why I do not want to push him this evening. I could have spoken for five minutes and then left him swinging on the hook, where we could beat him all around the Chamber trying to defend the indefensible of how we got into this position, but I do not want to do that. I want this debate to be a positive contribution, to lay out the challenge of why we are having to respond in this way and to give the Minister the room for manoeuvre to come forward with positive answers about all the opportunities of this policy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I may have some differences of opinion on this. The Minister responsible in the previous Administration was

the person who enabled my constituent, young Sophia Gibson, to get medicinal cannabis, which helped to stop the fits that that wee girl had. Today, her and her family have a better standard of life. While I understand that steps sometimes have to be taken, I would caution that we do not move forward until we are absolutely sure that there will be no side effects. In Sophia's case, it worked, but it will not work in every case.

Crispin Blunt: I listened with care to the hon. Gentleman and thank him for attending this debate and for championing the cause of his constituent. It is part of a piece. Behind the consideration of psychedelics sits consideration of cannabis as a medicine and, indeed, a wellness treatment. There is a huge economic as well as a health opportunity. They are not completely unrelated. His points are well made, but we do not want to get ourselves into a place where we have so much anxiety about risk where risk does not really exist in reality that we create blocks to progress.

This is where we need to come back to the historical context that led to the irrationality of the position we are in, which of course was the thalidomide crisis. That crisis led to the tightening of a number of regulations concerning the testing of investigational drugs. The commendable intent of those regulations was to ensure that drugs came to the market safe and effective. Double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trials became the gold standard for testing emerging medicines, but because psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is ultimately a form of psychotherapy, rather than a drug treatment in the traditional sense, strict adherence to those standards proved close to impossible to meet. The story of psychedelics is thus one of an extremely promising treatment modality that was lost in discussion over how to understand and evaluate therapeutic treatment effectiveness.

The primitive design of psychedelic trials in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as a lack of flexibility in how regulators evaluated more traditional pharmaceutical interventions, ultimately led to psychedelic-assisted therapies falling below the cut-off for approval as market-authorised medicines. Those drugs were completely novel to researchers and regulators. They troubled the distinction between biological psychiatry, with its pharmacological interventions, and the psychological arm of psychiatry and its psychotherapies. Given the novelty of the way in which these treatments work and the virtual impossibility of designing placebo controls for psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, it is no wonder that the trials of those drugs did not meet the standards of regulators remaining faithful to the standards used to test pharmaceutical interventions on their own. These treatments are fundamentally forms of psychotherapy, and need to be tested as such.

A flexible and intelligent capacity to measure the efficacy of a drug that facilitated psychotherapy was simply not yet present in the culture of the regulators of the time. With the stigma surrounding those drugs fuelling the tabloid appetite for excitable exaggeration, misinformation abounded about these mysterious, mind-altering substances. They appeared to belong to indigenous communities in remote jungles—surely there was nothing to learn there. I think that, in the decades since, we have learned a great deal about learning from experiences elsewhere in the world. In reality, death and injury rates, both physical and psychological, from unadulterated

[Crispin Blunt]

psychedelics are extremely low. Teams of researchers from the United States, the UK, the EU and Australia have consistently found psychedelics to be of the lowest possible harm potential of all the controlled drugs to both user and society. Those studies considered the physiological toxicity of these drugs, as well as other risks.

However, these drugs are best administered within supportive psychotherapeutic environments; doing so reduces the risks yet further. The medical research shows that, when administered in such settings, psychedelics are associated with very positive psychotherapeutic outcomes. For example, research by Robin Carhart-Harris and others in 2016 showed a significant decrease in depressive symptoms for up to six months—that in a cohort already suffering from treatment-resistant depression. Research by Ross and others in 2016 showed significant decreases in anxiety and depression, and research by Johnson and others in 2014 showed that 80% of the cohort were abstinent from smoking following treatment with psilocybin. Mental health harm is estimated to cost the UK economy more than £110 billion a year annually, a staggering 5% of our gross domestic product. Smoking alone costs the economy £14.7 billion per year, £2.5 billion of which falls to the national health service. Even if psychedelics were to play a small role in improving outcomes in those areas, the impact would be huge, given the impact of those areas on society and the economy.

The safety of these drugs has been firmly demonstrated, too. Phase 3 trials are now under way, meaning that their safety is well enough established in healthy and clinical populations that regulators are allowing research into their effectiveness in clinical treatment. Psilocybin and the other psychedelics have been well enough established as safe—that is all but unquestioned within the scientific and medical literature—and when administered under the supervision of trained professionals in suitably controlled environments, we move from a risk range of “minimal” to one of “very significant benefit”. The method of achieving the maximum benefit for patients and its extent is yet to be established, but there is every indication that it will be remarkable compared with psychotherapy unassisted by pharmacology or today’s pharmacological assistance of antidepressants, from which a depressing number of patients—please excuse the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker—now need withdrawal services, something that my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes is campaigning to address.

Research methods have matured since prohibition, so the best and easiest way to obtain information on how effective psychedelic-assisted psychotherapies will be in the real world is to establish research and access to prescribing physicians and researchers, but we are already falling behind. The potential has been identified across the world. To our embarrassment as a nation committed to science, entrepreneurship and sustaining one of the world’s great financial sectors, not only has \$7 billion been raised on the markets of North America to invest in this emerging bioscience technology—as compared with very little raised here—but our scientists, having largely owned this knowledge within the United Kingdom, are now following that investment.

The market for psychedelic substances is projected to grow from \$2 billion in 2020 to \$10.7 billion by 2027. Facilitating the investigation of these drugs in that way

would have allowed the United Kingdom to become the leading country in the study of the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic class of drugs and simultaneously facilitate access for patients. Hopefully, it is not too late, but unless this science is noisily supported and championed in the UK, it will be too late for the United Kingdom to make its proper contribution in this area.

The use of psilocybin and other psychedelics in psychiatry is of even greater medical and scientific importance than simply their commercial promise, yet the Government still want to evaluate the evidence regarding safety, scheduling and classification. To add insult to injury, it seems that they will only do so following a successful application for a medical formulation containing psilocybin to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

In practice, there appear to be three routes to the rescheduling of a substance within the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, of which it seems the Home Office remains wedded to one: rescheduling being triggered following a market authorisation by the MHRA. The more evidence-based route—a self-commissioned review by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs—is effectively ruled out because of the AMCD’s lack of funding and capacity. The simple third route is for the Minister in the Home Office to take the initiative and commission such a review of evidence with a view to rescheduling by the ACMD.

The Minister, had I given him time, would no doubt have referred to his commissioning of the ACMD to investigate barriers to researching substances controlled under schedule 1, and especially psilocybin, which I welcome. Forgive me for offering him time to reflect further before responding to more colleagues than just me. In July 2017, the then Home Secretary commissioned a review of the barriers to research caused by drugs designated as schedule 1, only for the long-term recommendations of the ACMD to be rejected. The current review has already been ongoing since 2020. Is this delay without cost?

Members of Parliament from across the House have provided to me and others, including the Home Office, a proposal for the Minister to safely resolve the issue based on evidence and in a short space of time. Indeed, when cannabis-based products for medicinal use were rescheduled in 2018, it took a mere 12 weeks. When the evidence and need are so overwhelming, just as they were for cannabis-based products for medicinal use, for what reason can the Government wait to take decisive action? The letter of the laws that govern use in medicine and science of these controlled substances is designed to be flexible and permissive. As I understand it, nearly two years ago, when the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), endorsed advice from his policy unit to get this done, the Home Office dived for the weeds of process around an application for a medicine before contemplating changing scheduling or classification.

I have asked the Home Office on three occasions by written parliamentary question whether it has in its possession any evidence that supports the current scheduling of psilocybin. I am wholly certain the answer is none. The MHRA, the Food and Drugs Administration, the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration and the UK science and research community all know there is not that evidence. Every day that we do not act to support

and enable the efforts of UK researchers, we hinder the progress of science and put what were our globally renowned research institutions at a growing disadvantage.

Perhaps most scandalously of all, this delay in the science now will be delay in the medicine deployed and the therapeutics established on the basis of those medicines. Some 1.2 million people with depression in the UK will continue to provide the grim reaper with 18 suicides a day. Our untreatable soldiers, traumatised from their active service in Iraq and Afghanistan, will continue to self-medicate with alcohol and other unsupervised drugs to the misery of themselves and their families. Addiction will be treated less effectively. Anxiety will not be addressed as it could be. That pain, and the scale of the economic cost to our country, demanded “Action This Day” a long time ago.

All that I have heard reinforces my hope that the Minister will break the logjam, which would be in direct accord with the Government’s 10-year drugs plan that aims to put evidence at the heart of drug policy. Behind the issue of psychedelics—practically and intellectually the easiest part of the drug policy thicket—sits the possibility of a legal cannabis and hemp industry, with huge economic and environmental positives to secure. The chance to seize that low-hanging fruit and reap the rewards presents itself to the Minister, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister has begun the machinery of government changes that should enable many departmental Ministers, as yet unrepresented in the councils and committees that in effect control our nation’s drug policy, to make a reality of that opportunity. If we make a reality of policy based on evidence, we can finally start to right the wrongs of 60 years of policy failure. The Minister has a historic opportunity to radically improve the lives of millions of his fellow citizens while helping the United Kingdom to be a world leader in medical research. Current drug policy has produced far more victims than successes; he can begin to reverse that.

7.26 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

In the short time that I have available, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for securing the debate and for the thoughtful, knowledgeable and carefully considered manner in which he delivered his speech. I also recognise the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who is in her place. I know that she has a deep personal interest in the topic, about which we had a detailed meeting a few days ago, so I am delighted to see her in the Chamber.

Of course, the Department of Health and Social Care leads on questions concerning the availability of medicines and prescribing, because medicines are licensed and regulated by the MHRA. The Home Office, however, is responsible for controlled drugs legislation and our controlled drugs licensing regime to support research and clinical trials in the UK, which is why I am responding rather than a Health Minister.

I am keen to encourage research into the use of drugs in the UK as far as we can. We have an internationally well-regarded research sector in universities and, of course, in commercial pharmaceutical companies. It can be a great source of national competitive advantage to make their research projects as straightforward as possible.

Drugs scheduled in schedule 1 can be used for research purposes, but with a licence. As I discussed with the hon. Member for Warrington North a few days ago, I know that some people feel that the process to obtain such a licence can be onerous, particularly for universities and NHS trusts. Clearly, for drugs scheduled in schedule 2 and higher, those restrictions do not apply in the same way. I am very aware of the point about research.

I am also aware that, to consider whether there are medical benefits that would support the rescheduling of drugs from schedule 1 to schedule 2 or higher, which might enable them to be prescribed to patients for medical purposes, there needs to be a research base. I accept that there is an element of chicken and egg or Catch-22 about the situation, because we need to do the research before there is an evidence base to justify the rescheduling that might be merited.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate said, I received part 1 of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs’ advice on reducing barriers to research with controlled drugs, which focused on synthetic cannabinoids. In December last year, so just a few weeks ago, I formally commissioned it to conduct part 2 of its review, which is designed and intended to consider, and will consider, research with schedule 1 drugs more widely. That of course includes LSD and MDMA. In my letter to the ACMD commissioning that work, I specifically highlighted psilocybin. It would be open to the Government, depending on the ACMD’s advice, to change the research rules to say that all schedule 1 drugs might be capable of being used for research purposes without the onerous requirements that currently apply, in the same way as happens with schedule 2 drugs and higher, or some variation of that. There is obviously quite a lot of policy detail that one would have to consider, but were that move to be made, it would clearly address the barriers to research that my hon. Friend highlighted. Were those barriers to research to be removed, the evidence base could then be developed, which might provide a basis for the MHRA to make a case that such a drug should be moved to schedule 2 or higher, and that would facilitate doctors prescribing these drugs to the patients who need them.

My hon. Friend very kindly said that he would not press me too hard, given that I am relatively new in this position. I think the comments I have made do suggest that there is a path forward. I do strongly support making it as easy as possible for UK institutions—universities, hospitals and private companies—to conduct research using not just psilocybin, but all drugs, and there is clearly a commercial as well as an academic benefit. I am looking forward to receiving the ACMD advice as soon as possible, and I can certainly assure my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Warrington North and others that, when that is received, it will receive my prompt and positive attention.

Crispin Blunt: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I think you are indicating that we are almost out of time, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am sure my hon. Friend and I can speak briefly afterwards, and on that point, I will rest.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 March 2023

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

London Zoo Lease

9.30 am

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

That this House has considered the matter of the lease for London Zoo.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Dame Caroline, in this debate on extending the lease for London Zoo. I am pleased to see colleagues, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—no doubt to talk about Londonderry's zoo, but unfortunately it is London Zoo that we will be talking about—and the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), both of whom have a direct interest. I am also pleased to see the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), speaking for the Opposition, and my hon. Friend the Minister. I look forward to hearing their contributions.

London Zoo has been a staple tourist attraction since it opened to the general public in 1847—of course, none of us was around at the time. For centuries, tourists have flocked to the 36-acre site in Regent's Park to get a closer look at some of the world's most exotic creatures in the oldest scientific zoo in the world. Today, 176 years later, London Zoo continues to be one of London's most popular attractions, despite covid, welcoming more than 1 million visitors a year, including 80,000 schoolchildren. For many, such a visit provides a unique experience and a unique opportunity to see up close some of the 20,000 animals to which London Zoo is home and to learn more about unique species and species at risk of extinction in the wild.

I am sure Members here today would agree that London Zoo is a childhood memory for many of us, and I vividly remember my first visit—the excitement of seeing in the flesh those huge animals that had previously been confined to the television, which in my case was a black and white. Additionally, over the years, some of London Zoo's most notable residents are said to have further influenced our childhoods: the likes of Winnie-the-Pooh and Dumbo the elephant originated from the animals of London Zoo.

Recently, I was lucky enough to be welcomed back to London Zoo by Matthew Gould, Vicky Godwin and the team, and I am pleased they are here for today's debate. Whatever someone's age, London Zoo is a fantastic day out, and even on a cold January morning, the array of diverse species and educational areas provides a fantastic outing.

London Zoo is run by ZSL—the Zoological Society of London—which is an international conservation society established under royal charter in 1826. The charity is driven by science, and there are 140 scientists working on site to protect species, restore ecosystems, collaborate with communities around the world and inspire positive change for biodiversity. The work they

carry out across the globe is led by evidence, and they produce the hugely beneficial data for the Living Planet Index, which is the world's leading dataset on global wildlife.

London Zoo provides a huge number of benefits, both for local communities and for the animal kingdom at large. Each year, tourists from London, the wider United Kingdom and across the globe visit the zoo. That contributes to the funding for the zoo, but also to the wider United Kingdom economy, as visitors are much more likely to spend money in the surrounding areas, particularly as the zoo is only a stone's throw from some of London's many cultural hotspots. Each year, the zoo is responsible for contributing a huge sum—more than £24 million—to the local economy.

Community outreach projects are instrumental within the philosophy of the zoo. On my recent visit, I was impressed by the new garden area, where volunteers with complex needs can spend the day gardening and visiting the animals for much-needed respite and wellbeing. I know that you, Dame Caroline, take a particular interest in that area.

The zoo has also recently implemented a community access scheme to enable those on income support and other benefits to visit for as little as £3. During February half-term alone, more than 50,000 visits were facilitated through that operation. It is essential that everyone, regardless of where they live, has access to nature and outdoor space. I am pleased, therefore, that ZSL is committed to providing access for those who need the extra help, so that no one is left out.

Further, the educational offerings provide a critical supplement to classroom working for many children. Workshops are tailored to cater for all age groups and learning needs, educating children on hugely important topics, including wildlife, conservation, climate change and the impacts of pollution.

The zoo's research has perhaps benefited animals the most, shaping the future of many previously endangered species. Many animals at risk of extinction have participated in the zoo's breeding programmes, to ensure that they are saved for future generations. In 2021–22 alone, more than £17.4 million was spent on conservation science and field conservation programmes, with £38.5 million spent on conservation animal care, breeding programmes and conservation translocations. I am pleased that the zoo will, in the coming months, be returning the previously endangered Guam kingfisher into the wild.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. It is entitled “London Zoo Lease”, but we have Belfast Zoo in Northern Ireland, which is doing similar work, with conservation of endangered species at the forefront. It is important that all zoos across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland work together, whether that be London, Belfast or other zoos.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, to ensure that zoos are safe and enable animals to have a good quality of life—today's zoos are different today from those we had when I was a wee boy, which was not yesterday—improvements must be made regularly, and that needs investment. That is easier to secure when there is long-term potential, rather than an uncertain future. Having the longer lease and the opportunity to expand will be to

[Jim Shannon]

the advantage of London Zoo, but I believe it will also be to the advantage of all zoos across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, which goes to the nub of the issue that I am about to raise. ZSL and Whipsnade Zoo bring animals into the wild in a much more open setting, for them to run free and enjoy the benefits of a much larger area. He is right that zoos in this day and age do not confine animals to small cages, and there is the opportunity for animals to have a much wider spread. It is so important to get investment in zoos and to enable them to operate in such a fashion.

I called this debate because the Crown Estate Act 1961, which we have all no doubt studied in great detail, currently governs the lease of ZSL's Regent's Park site. The Act caps the lease at a maximum of 60 years, presenting a number of difficulties, which I will come to shortly. Through this debate and a subsequent change in the law, we hope to extend that maximum lease tenure to 150 years—a 90-year increase. This is not a new ask. Fairly recently, in 2018, a similar Bill was introduced to extend the lease for Kew Gardens, and that is now on the statute books.

At present, with only 60 years on the leasehold, there is a significant impact on the zoo's ability to raise funds, create new partnerships, expand support programmes for the local community and invest substantially in regeneration of the existing site. What needs to be understood is that many of the buildings on the site are listed. ZSL is not suggesting that it wants to remove those listed buildings; it wants to regenerate them and make them fit for purpose in the current, modern environment.

The zoo's extremely high running costs, including rising energy bills, of which we are all aware, cannot be compromised on, because it has to sustain climates appropriate for the animals and birdlife in the zoo. Given the zoo's stature as an organisation—it receives no Government grant aid at all—it is vital that it is able to secure as much funding as possible and to plan for the future. To continue with the 60-year lease would make the zoo financially impossible to sustain and would bring us to a crisis point. I strongly suggest that we should not get to that position.

In 1826, when the zoo was founded, the average life expectancy in this country peaked at about 40. Thus, a 60-year lease was significantly longer than the average life expectancy, and was therefore a reasonable and respectable length. Thankfully, with the advancements in modern science and a better understanding of health and evolution, our average life expectancy has soared, and is now more than double that in the Victorian times, at an average of about 80 years. That makes a 60-year lease redundant. Thus, to tackle the complex challenges facing global wildlife, it is simply not long enough.

The knock-on effects of extending the lease will no doubt transform the site, not only for visitors but for the scientists who do such a brilliant job in the zoo. More certainty on the lease length would enable ZSL to find global investment partners willing to fund the state-of-the-art laboratories and drastically improve the current buildings that act as the animals' habitat.

There are 140 scientists currently working in dilapidated buildings, which is considerably inhibiting their research. Unsurprisingly, they want modern conditions in which to practise and do their research. Providing new, fully equipped areas where they can conduct those vital studies would benefit not only the public but the animals themselves and other institutions, through the Living Planet Index. Further, London Zoo currently houses 16 species that are extinct in the wild and more than 100 seriously endangered species. Expanding those numbers through space, research and developed understanding, brought about by the leasehold, would prevent us from losing any more of those wonderful creatures.

Normally, when I give speeches in this place, I have a long list of questions for the Minister, but my simple ask today is for her to enable the lease to be extended to 150 years, either by supporting my excellent private Member's Bill on 24 March or by amending another piece of legislation. When she responds, if she wants to make a short speech and just say yes, that would shorten these proceedings quite considerably.

As I come to the end of my speech and allow other Members to take to the Floor with their insightful comments, I remind colleagues of the important contributions that London Zoo and ZSL have made over the past 200 years. The iconic naturalist, Charles Darwin, conducted many of his studies at the site. Thus, it can be assumed that, without London Zoo's existence, we would not have a proper understanding of the theory of evolution. Another significant character to come out of the zoo, I am told, is my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin). I am sure that, without his zoological background, his adept manner of dealing with some of the more animal-like behaviour in Parliament would have been very different. Of course, he is now the Chairman of the Committee of Selection, so he has to deal with us all appropriately.

I leave Members with a final thought from the legendary Sir David Attenborough, highlighting further the need for the Crown Estate Act 1961 to be amended to enable a lease extension up to 150 years to ensure the continuation of this renowned establishment:

"ZSL's work is vital in driving forward a vision of a world where wildlife thrives...from tiny dart frogs to majestic tigers and everything in between."

9.44 am

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate and setting out the argument with great clarity and substance. Indeed, I think the argument is pretty well made, and I hope that, as he said, the Minister will be able to reply with a one-word answer to the ask from ZSL and the zoo.

Zoos have not always had the best press—certainly, a couple of decades ago, we had examples where the treatment of animals in zoos was very much called into question—but there are outstanding zoos, and ZSL and London Zoo are of course part of that. They have shown, over a great many years, the critical role that a well-managed zoo can play in animal conservation and education.

Over many years, I have been pleased to be able to go to the zoo, both individually and as a parent—as the hon. Member said, it is wonderful to see the joy and delight that children take from the zoo—and also to see

some of the projects that ZSL has run, which illustrate exactly the case the hon. Member has made. It has done marvellous, pioneering work in conservation and education, and recently I have twice been able to go to projects run from the penguin pools, which have been an example of ZSL's groundbreaking work on marine conservation. One of the penguins still has a set of my headphones—one of the lessons I would encourage people to learn is to never trust a penguin with anything loose and dangling.

I have no doubt that the work ZSL does has been part of the groundbreaking work on ocean protection we saw brought to a conclusion only a couple of weeks ago. Those things do not come out of nowhere; they come out of the work done by scientists and leading establishments to raise awareness and increase public pressure for change in the area of conservation. London Zoo itself sees 80,000 children a year come through its doors, which is an illustration of just how superb that work is.

We have already heard that the zoo's income is primarily from ticket sales, so supporting the work we want to see—on animal welfare, conservation and education—requires the site to constantly readapt itself for the modern world. That, in turn, requires investment and the refresh and reimagining that we have heard about and that has been set out in the zoo's case. Without the opportunity to improve its facilities in line with changing user expectations—and, indeed, changing expectations as regards standards of animal care and protection—its business model will fail.

The zoo has made the case that some of its buildings are substandard, for both those working in them and visitors, and they were severely affected, for example, in the catastrophic 2021 floods, which caused so much damage across north-west London. That situation is not something that can be maintained if the zoo is seeking to have a million visitors a year through its doors. Of course, its buildings need to be brought up to fine standards but, in addition, it needs to look constantly at new ways in which it can maintain the expectation of a quality experience for visitors.

We know how important investment is for the animals themselves and for animal welfare and education, but London Zoo also has a vital role in London's tourist economy. The hon. Member for Harrow East spelled some of this out, but London's economy is still recovering from the pandemic, and it is critical that we continue to support our fine cultural institutions. We had a debate here a few weeks ago about arts venues in London and the need to ensure that they continue to receive the investment they require. People come to London for a first-class cultural experience, and that includes visiting London Zoo. They rightly expect that that experience will be a quality one in a quality and modern environment.

I strongly support London Zoo's pitch for a lease extension. It is a necessary, sensible and pragmatic approach to securing long-term investment. As we have heard, the request by ZSL will merely bring it into line with other leases of Crown Estate land, as well as comparable organisations such as Kew. Legal adjustments of this kind, while minor in the great scheme of things, often seem to fly beneath Government's radar. They are local and specific, and Governments do not like to find time for this kind of thing. But we also know that the private Member's Bill route is arbitrary—it depends

on who wins a place in the ballot and on whether a vulnerable private Member's Bill manages to get through the process—so we need the Government to act.

The proposal from London Zoo is modest and specific, yet extremely valuable. I strongly commend it, and I hope the Minister will be able to take it forward without further delay.

9.50 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing today's debate on extending the lease of London Zoo under the Crown Estate Act.

As many hon. Members will know, London Zoo will come under my new constituency of the Cities of London and Westminster. I am sure my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), will be devastated to lose it in the boundary changes. I am delighted to hear of the so many great experiences she has had there, personally and as its Member of Parliament.

I know well of the incredible work that ZSL does in the local community, and in its efforts for scientific animal conservation. Personally, I have visited London Zoo over many years. My family and I were members of London Zoo. We had so many visits when my children were young. I particularly remember the gorillas, which my children were always fascinated by. In my time as a local councillor, I also had the good fortune to visit London Zoo on several occasions. In fact, my first ever official visit as cabinet member for public protection and licensing was to the zoo, to visit the tigers. They did not have much to say to me, but it was fascinating to see the work behind the scenes. No matter the debate about zoos, it is clear that the conservation work that London Zoo and zoos across the country do is so important for global animal conservation.

I also saw how important the zoo's work was in educating children about the work on conservation of animals, in this country and with global partners. I am also aware of the important role that Regent's Park and London Zoo play in the central London tourist offer; the hon. Member for Westminster North also made that point. We know that the covid pandemic made a huge dent in London's tourism. It is slowly building back up, and we need to have the offer for families and individuals to come to London and enjoy the west end, the restaurants, other tourist attractions, and also London Zoo.

As we know, the zoo opened in 1828 and is the oldest scientific zoo in the world, something we should be proud of. Over the past nearly 200 years, much has changed in the surrounding area and within the zoo itself, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East pointed out. It is home to nearly 700 species of animals, from lions and tigers to penguins, meerkats and, obviously, the gorillas.

Since its conception, London Zoo has never compromised on being the best for conservation and research, as well as for visitors and everyday tourists. The incredibly important scientific research that ZSL continues to undertake helps to support conservation and ensures that endangered species, from Sumatran tigers to the rare Indian purple frog, are protected in the wild.

[Nickie Aiken]

Contrary to common belief, the zoo and the conservation work done in the wild go hand in hand; they are mutually reliant. It is an absolutely key point to note that London Zoo offers a sanctuary to endangered species and, importantly, provides training for the next generation of conservationists.

I was really impressed to learn about the zoo's outstanding community access scheme that it set up in 2019, which initially set out to offer more than 100,000 subsidised tickets to low-income, elderly and disabled people so that they too could experience the zoo's offer at a little more than a tenth of the price of a regular ticket. Again, that is an example of London Zoo's opening itself out to the local community.

As I said, it is so important that we continue to support London Zoo as a nation, which is why it is so important that we support the quest of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East to secure an extension to its lease, because we must make sure that it can continue to thrive as it reaches its 200th anniversary. I therefore support my hon. Friend's campaign to persuade the Government, and I hope the Minister will provide us with a positive response—if not today, perhaps on Second Reading of my hon. Friend's Zoological Society of London (Leases) Bill, which I think is on 24 March. It is important that we succeed in amending the Crown Estate Act so that we can extend the zoo's lease by 150 years. The current 60 years is ridiculous. As we have heard today, if we do not extend it, there will be implications for the zoo's ability to raise more money to continue its work, and to encourage investment from global partners. Without that investment, we will not be able to continue its outstanding conservation work.

I will end by saying that I wholeheartedly support extending London Zoo's lease in Regent's Park for as long as possible, but I think we can live with 150 years at the start. I believe it is imperative that we give this great institution the protection it needs to be able to support generations of conservationists in the coming years.

9.57 am

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on leading and securing the debate, and it is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Opposition.

As we have heard today, London Zoo is a treasured British attraction. It plays a vital role in drawing tourists to London and contributes to both the local economy and the country more widely. It also does vital work on wildlife conservation, educates school groups and young people, and provides heavily discounted tickets for those on lower incomes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) outlined as the local MP. Given that it has been through such a difficult time with the pandemic, and now with the challenges of the cost of living crisis, we want to support London Zoo to thrive, along with the other attractions up and down the country that help make up Britain's unique tourist offer.

London Zoo is the world's oldest scientific zoo. It hosts 1 million visitors every year and was the UK's seventh most popular paid-entry tourism attraction in 2021. It contributes more than £24 million a year to the local economy, and its annual visitors include over

80,000 schoolchildren, who participate in lessons and workshops. Through the zoo's community access scheme, more than 100,000 visitors on low-income support and other benefits have been able to visit the zoo each year for just £3.

In 2021-22, London Zoo's parent charity, the Zoological Society of London, spent £17.4 million on conservation science and field conservation programmes. It also spent £38.5 million on caring for animals in conservation zoos. More than 100 of the species cared for at London Zoo are endangered, and the zoo plays an active role in breeding programmes for those species to try to make their populations viable for the future. Between the ZSL and Whipsnade Zoo, 16 extinct-in-the-wild species are being cared for, so London Zoo carries out really important work, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) spoke about.

London Zoo is important in its own right and essential to the UK's visitor economy. Today's debate is on the specific matter of the zoo's lease, which is governed by the Crown Estate Act 1961. Under the current law, London Zoo's lease is capped at a maximum of 60 years. Although that might have been appropriate when ZSL was founded in 1826, 60 years is no longer suitable when it comes to tackling the long-term, complex challenges facing wildlife. The zoo says the lease limits its ability to fundraise, to create new partnerships to expand its support programmes for the community and to invest the funds required to retrofit and regenerate the London Zoo site. The zoo is home to many listed and historic buildings, which are no longer fit for purpose as animal houses and in need of maintenance and restoration. A longer lease will help the zoo give those buildings a new lease of life and make them environmentally sustainable, preserving its unique heritage.

The zoo seeks an amendment to the Crown Estate Act, which would extend its lease to a maximum of 150 years, in line with other lease agreements regulated under the Act and the Crown Estate's lease for equivalent organisations, such as Kew Gardens. It is a common-sense change that would improve the zoo's capacity to bring in investment and carry on its important work. Zoos are still recovering from periods of closure and restrictions during the pandemic, when they continued expertly caring for animals while closed to the public. They also have to deal with pressures of massive increases to energy bills, staff costs, food for the animals and other inflationary price rises through the supply chain, plus the impact of the cost of living crisis on households' ability to afford tickets to attractions such as the zoo. It therefore makes sense to give zoos all the help we can.

The lease change would be at no extra cost to the public purse but would make a real difference to London Zoo. I understand that the hon. Member for Harrow East has tabled a private Member's Bill aiming to make that change, which is due to have its Second Reading next week. Does the Minister intend to support it and make time for its passage through the House? If not, will they find another way to make the necessary legislative amendment to London Zoo's lease, extending it to 150 years? We think this is a reasonable ask and look forward to hearing from the Minister.

10.1 am

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I thank my hon.

Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate on the important topic of London Zoo and its lease. I should like to please him by ending this debate by saying yes. However, I can only say yes in principle, and I want to make sure the Government works with ZSL to that end. We are alive to its concerns and want to make sure that we can deliver on them. It is a matter of finding the right legislative vehicle, notwithstanding my hon. Friend's upcoming private Member's Bill.

As my hon. Friend notes, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport acts as the landlord for the site occupied by London Zoo in Regent's Park on behalf of the Crown. While the policy area is led by my expert colleague Lord Parkinson and I answer on his behalf, as the newly minted Tourism Minister, I also have my own interest in seeing the zoo succeed. It was wonderful to hear how it contributes £24 million to the local economy every year.

The zoo's current lease was recently renewed for another 60 years, taking it to 2081. I hope that gives hon. Members comfort. However, I understand that London Zoo is looking to extend the length of that lease to have a secure future for the long-term investment it seeks, and continue to develop and make the most of a historic and treasured site. The change, as other hon. Members have noted, would bring the zoo in line with other similar organisations that have leases on Crown Estate land, including the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. We agree that increasing the length of the lease would have a significant impact on the zoo's long-term sustainability and help it continue its tremendous work to educate and inspire zoo visitors and conduct vital conservation work for many years to come. I have enjoyed hearing hon. Members' stories about their memories and experiences of London Zoo. It is a much-loved national institution and I am among many of my fellow citizens, having visited the zoo several times. I think about canal boat holidays where we moored on Regent's canal next to the wonderful aviary, taking many day trips and being part of the keeper-for-a-day experience when I met Rocky, the rockhopper penguin. I want to make sure that my children have the same experiences and enjoyment for years to come.

I know that the question of the lease is especially relevant now because of the significant impact of the covid pandemic on the zoo, which relies on visitors for most of its income. Officials in my Department are in regular contact with ZSL and are committed to exploring ways in which we can amend the primary legislation to extend the maximum term of the lease in the very near future. We recognise the immense value to the nation of ensuring that future. London Zoo is an important and unique part of our capital's culture and heritage offer. It is not only a significant tourist attraction for visitors from across the country and the world, but the world's oldest scientific zoo and a world-leading force in wildlife conservation. We firmly believe that it is an asset worth protecting and championing.

As other Members have noted, it was opened in 1828 by the Zoological Society of London. When the zoo opened, it was purely for scientific research; eminent scientists of the day, including Charles Darwin, used it for study purposes. The zoo subsequently opened to the public in 1847. Since that opening, the zoo has achieved

many world firsts, including the first reptile house, the first public aquarium, the first insect house and the first children's zoo.

As well as being of historic significance due to the pioneering nature of the zoo, many of those assets are of notable architectural significance. The zoo's grounds and its animal enclosure in Regent's Park were originally laid out by architect Decimus Burton. Since then, many leading architects have contributed to the zoo's built environment, creating a wonderful collection of buildings that includes two grade I, and eight grade II/II* listed structures. Because of advances in our understanding of animal welfare, many of those structures are no longer suitable or used for their original purposes. London Zoo is working very hard to reimagine those spaces, bringing them back to new life in innovative and sustainable ways.

One notable example is the magnificent Snowdon Aviary, which has been a feature of the north London skyline since 1965. It is a feat of engineering inspired by the movement of birds, and has recently been transformed into a state of the art walk-through enclosure for Colobus monkeys—nicknamed the high-flying monkeys because of their impressive leaps from treetop to treetop. That project was made possible with the help of over £4 million of funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

In addition to its unique built heritage, London Zoo is part of the Zoological Society of London, which is a global conservation charity that is home to nearly 20,000 animals. It undertakes crucial conservation work at London Zoo and its partner zoo in Whipsnade, as well as at over 70 locations across the world, caring for and breeding endangered species and promoting participation and knowledge of conservation to the wider public. Alongside that world-leading conservation work, the zoo, and the park in which it is based, are important and popular visitor destinations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) made a compelling case for not just London Zoo's importance to tourism but the importance of all the wonderful attractions in her constituency.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister is making an excellent speech, and I agree with the direction of travel today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this excellent debate and his Bill. I have a strange intervention to make. My grandfather worked for many years at London Zoo. When he retired, there was a policy in force where the next animal to be born in situ after retirement would be named after that individual. I am proud to report that my grandfather was followed by a giraffe called Robbie—my grandfather was Albert Roberts. I would be interested to understand if that scheme still exists today; could the Minister find out and report back? It would be great to know where Robbie is, if he is still around and if he is in good health.

Julia Lopez: I think that is the most tremendous intervention I will ever take. While I cannot confirm or deny Robbie's continued existence, I suspect he has sired many children, and there are many giraffe babies with Robbie's genes. I am sure that somebody from ZSL will be able to answer that question for my hon. Friend. If he needs any help, I would be happy to make inquiries.

[Julia Lopez]

The zoo itself is the capital's 10th most visited attraction, and contributes £24 million to the economy each year locally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said. In 2022, London Zoo saw 1.8 million visitors, inspiring adults and children alike with a much greater appreciation for wildlife and nature. To build on that success, and open up the zoo to an even wider audience, this year ZSL has introduced a wonderful community access scheme to help families with lower incomes access the zoo for only £3 a ticket. That scheme is part funded by a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. I was interested to hear about the experiences of the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) with the education facilities as the local MP. The queues for the zoo during the recent half-term are testament to how well that kind of scheme is received. I understand that the scheme saw 50,000 people on income support visit the zoo during half term. London Zoo is therefore considering how to build on that scheme, taking it forward in the long term so that everybody can access its inspiring zoos.

The commitment to accessibility does not stop there. The zoo also runs audio-described tours, sign language tours and early morning openings aimed at autistic and neurodiverse visitors. Over 80,000 school students visit London Zoo each year, learning about wildlife and conservation and taking part in workshops, on subjects including climate change and plastic pollution. All of those initiatives serve to improve access for everybody, across society, to visit and learn more about the natural world.

Looking forward, in 2028 London Zoo will celebrate 200 years of being open, and I am sure I am not alone in wishing it success in the next 200 years. There are ambitious plans to modernise the zoo by redeveloping its animal spaces to create naturalistic, multi-species zones; I am sure the way in which the zoo is approaching the important issue of conservation means that its future is secure.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for bringing the House's attention to the issue of the lease. We firmly believe that London Zoo is an asset

that is worth protecting and championing. As I said, Lord Parkinson leads on policy in this area and I am sure he will be happy to meet in order to discuss the specific issue of the lease, as well as the question of a legislative vehicle through which the extension of that lease might be delivered. I thank everybody for contributing to the debate.

10.10 am

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place—I have managed to silence the hon. Gentleman, which must be a unique achievement. I also thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), and the Minister for contributing to the debate.

It is quite clear, from my speech and the other speeches we heard, that in the view of the House the lease should be extended to a minimum of 150 years, so that ZSL can continue the wonderful work it does. As there is all-party support and we have debated the concept, that means there is no need for a debate on Second Reading of my private Member's Bill. The Government have said the extension is a good thing to do and the Opposition agree, so there is no reason for anyone to block the Bill on 24 March. I look forward to intense discussions with my hon. Friend the Minister and her ministerial colleague in the other place, ensuring that we can get my private Member's Bill on the statute book without delay, so that ZSL can continue the wonderful work it does.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the lease for London Zoo.

10.12 am

Sitting suspended.

Knife Crime: West Midlands

11 am

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Before I call Suzanne Webb to move the motion, I remind hon. Members that there will not be an opportunity after the Minister has spoken for the Member in charge to make a winding-up speech, which is normal practice for 30-minute debates.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of knife crime in the West Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I want to tell you about Ryan Passey. Ryan was aged only 24 when he died from a single fatal stab wound to the heart during a night out at Chicago's club in Stourbridge in 2017. Six months later, a jury heard Kobe Murray, who was 19 at the time, admit to stabbing an unarmed Ryan through the heart during a dancefloor brawl. This shook the community to the core. Following what is known as a perverse verdict, Kobe Murray walked free from court acquitted of both murder and manslaughter. The verdict shocked Ryan's devastated family, his friends and the community. We can only imagine the anguish of losing a child in such a manner and the perpetrator walking free.

Knife crime has touched our community in an unimaginable way, and that was compounded by news of another shocking death—that of Cody Fisher, who was stabbed and killed in a Birmingham nightclub on Boxing day last year. A more recent death is that of Bailey Atkinson. On Sunday morning, as I was putting the finishing touches to my speech, I was shocked to hear of yet another fatal stabbing—that of Akeem Francis-Kerr in a local Walsall nightclub. I am led to believe that there was yet another yesterday, and that, last night, there was a machete attack in Walsall. These are lives needlessly lost, and the families are now in torment.

If I may, Dame Caroline, I will read a statement from the Passey family about the loss of their son to knife crime:

"Ryan was an amazing, bubbly 24-year-old who loved football, his family, friends, and life.

On the 6th of August 2017 our whole world was shattered when on a night out with his best friend, Ryan was stabbed through his heart inside a busy nightclub in Stourbridge and died shortly later at Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham.

In February 2018 at Birmingham Crown Court, his killer, who admitted to stabbing Ryan, was unbelievably acquitted of both his murder and manslaughter—claiming he had acted in self-defence and accidentally stabbed Ryan. Kobe walked free from court without any punishment.

The Acquittal verdict for our family caused us double trauma. It was as though Ryan had been murdered twice.

The past 5 years continue to be traumatic for us all and we have not been able to grieve properly for Ryan. No family should have to go through what we are experiencing. We continue to suffer daily following the loss of our only child. His sudden death leaves our lives empty and always wondering, what may have been?

The impact on our lives is immeasurable."

Dame Caroline, we can only imagine what it must feel like to have watched your child go out for a night only to be told hours later that they were never coming home. The escalating horror of knife crime is all too

real, and West Midlands police recorded the highest rate of knife crime in England and Wales over the past year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the House. Knife crime—whether in the west midlands or across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—is incredibly destructive for families and for people. My information, which relates to Northern Ireland, is that between December 2020 and November 2021 there were 15 murders; one manslaughter; one corporate manslaughter, which included six people; 23 attempted murders; and 58 reported threats to kill involving knives or other sharp instruments. It is clear that knife crime is on the rise. Does the hon. Lady agree that that rise creates an obligation to increase minimum sentencing to ensure that those who carry a knife do so in full knowledge of the prison time they will face should they choose to use it?

Suzanne Webb: I am pleased to say that some of my constituents have raised two petitions on that matter, and I look forward to seeing how they are pursued through the legislative agenda.

West Midlands police recorded the highest rate of 152 offences involving a knife crime per 100,000 of the population in 2021-22, which is significant. The possession of weapons, including knives, has increased since 2012 by 496% to 7,257 incidents a year.

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): I am so sorry to hear the sad news about the fatality in my hon. Friend's constituency. Street Whyze Project is a community interest company in my constituency, and was set up a year ago by Danny Mondesir following similar fatalities. It has been doing fantastic outreach work with young people across the midlands, delivering knife crime awareness sessions in schools, colleges and other institutions, including within the Prison Service. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need more education and early intervention by services such as Street Whyze Project to help our young residents to stay away from violent crime and even from being tempted to carry a weapon in the first place?

Suzanne Webb: I commend Danny for the amazing work that his project is doing and I completely agree that early intervention is a very good way to go. I would be more than happy to talk to my hon. Friend in more detail about what we can do as MPs in the west midlands to facilitate such intervention.

Not only has there been an increase in the possession of weapons, but there is the corresponding issue of the significant increase in violence against the person, including knife crime, which is up by 439%. It is astonishing and unacceptable that total crime has risen by 113% in the west midlands over the past decade; it suggests that there has been a significant failure locally in the approach to prevent or deter crime in the west midlands.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Is it not a sad reflection of what we are seeing today across our various constituencies in the west midlands that the police and crime commissioner is nowhere to be seen on this? At least the previous police and crime commissioner occasionally came out, but this particular police and crime commissioner is sitting in his ivory tower, or

[Marco Longhi]

perhaps it is a Tower of Babel, because he seems to speak a different language or no language at all, from me and others. I have now written to him, via recorded mail, and he is still not answering. Just as we see not a single Labour Member here today, the Labour police and crime commissioner is failing the people of the west midlands. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Suzanne Webb: I most certainly do. One may consider that the police and crime commissioner is focusing too much of his attention on his mayoral prospects as opposed to performing his role as the police and crime commissioner. He needs to consider that, because we have had a decade of increased crime—significantly increased crime, in fact, with a 496% increase in the possession of weapons, and it is all under the watch of two Labour police and crime commissioners.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. She is making a really passionate and important speech on this topic, which affects so many people. I was also saddened to hear about what happened in Walsall, the town of my birth.

Building on the point that my hon. Friend has just made, a recent report showed that burglaries too are higher under any Labour police and crime commissioner. Is it now not just very clear that the Labour police and crime commissioner is completely failing in his task and that that failure brings into question whether we should even have a police and crime commissioner? Is it not time to scrap the PCC in the west midlands?

Suzanne Webb: I thank my hon. Friend for that very powerful intervention. Again, I completely agree. The intention had always been that the police and crime commissioner role and the mayoral role would be a combined role, and I cannot think of anyone more fitting than our current Mayor, Andy Street, to pick up that combined role. His heart and his passion in the community, as someone who understands that community so well, mean that he would do an absolutely amazing job, and I really cannot believe that he would find any part of this situation acceptable if it had happened under his watch.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. On that specific point about the complete lack of visibility of the police and crime commissioner, I can honestly say that we do not see him in Aldridge-Brownhills; he is not supporting our local campaign to keep the police station open. It was Andy Street who joined me in Aldridge, just a couple of weeks ago, at the launch of the first knife bin that has been installed through the work of the James Brindley Foundation. The Brindley family is another family that was tragically hit when their son was stabbed to death a number of years ago.

Does my hon. Friend agree that although the role of policing is hugely important and the role of Government is important, organisations such as the James Brindley Foundation have a really important place in the community for the work that they do, not just by providing knife bins but in terms of education and going into schools, which is a critical part of tackling the heinous problem of knife crime?

Suzanne Webb: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. I am keen to see early intervention. Where there is a failing police and crime commissioner, community groups seem to do a much better job of understanding and tackling the problem.

I am keen to ensure that we get into schools and local community groups. It would be fantastic to get perpetrators of the crime who have gone through the rehabilitation process to speak to young adults, and explain what it is like to go out with a knife, resulting in blood on their hands and ultimately a criminal record. They could explain that that is not a good thing. Equally, families of victims could speak to schoolchildren to explain that they have a choice: to carry a knife or not to carry a knife. If they carry a knife, they will be either the perpetrator or the victim.

On the point about the police and crime commissioner, one might criticise the two police and crime commissioners in post during this decade, which we do. That is reflected in the crime rate across the west Midlands at the moment. Knowing the Passey family so well, and being so close to the impacts of knife crime, I believe this is bigger than politics. Whoever is in post, we need to fix this and get a grip. Do not blame austerity, do not throw the political book at it, which I know the police and crime commissioner has done and would do; throw heart and commitment at stopping young adults carrying knives. That is what it is all about and what needs to be done.

This is skyrocketing crime and we need to stop it. We need to prevent more lives from being lost. Knife crime destroys lives and families, and it is blighting our communities. We need to take knives off our streets. Only yesterday, the chair of the West Midlands Police Federation called for a ban on the sale of machetes, as part of an all-out assault on knife crime. We need to listen to officers on the frontline. I would be happy to meet the Police Federation to hear more about what is happening on our streets.

Wendy Morton: Will my hon. Friend indulge me once more? She has talked about support for police, and she has raised many topics. Another area that is often thought about, especially when a crime has been committed, is the use of curfews. Does she agree that when the police recommend curfews to a local authority, it is important for local councillors to work hand in glove with the police to deliver these extra measures to help to protect our town centres and citizens?

Suzanne Webb: Again, I cannot but agree. I have just done a radio interview, prior to coming here, in which I talked about that. I completely agree that we need to bring together the community—councillors, councils and MPs—to talk about this.

The Government have already acted by making the west midlands one of four pilot areas for serious violence reduction orders, which involve stop and search. I thank them for that, and I look forward to hearing the outcome and results. I also welcome the news that the force is set to launch a serious youth violence strategy, which aims to reduce youth crime by focusing on early intervention. I support West Midlands police in doing that, and I would very much like to be part of it, if there is anything I can do to facilitate it.

As I mentioned, my constituents have been brilliant—there are two e-petitions relevant to this debate, asking for changes to the level of sentencing for knife crime,

and I thank my constituents for their action on this. A knife bin has been installed in Stourbridge after the successful campaign by the Passey family. I have distributed bleed kits that were donated by the family to local clubs and pubs. More needs to be done to prevent from anyone wanting or feeling the need to carry a knife. I do not ever want another family to lose a loved one to knife crime in my constituency.

We have to ask the question: why do people carry a knife in the first place? The reasons are multifold: to be respected, to fit in, for protection or even with the intent to commit a heinous crime. It is also linked to gang crime. Many who carry a knife will have no premeditated intention of using it, but they may unintentionally end up doing so. The consequences are life changing. The stark truth is that a person is more likely to be stabbed with their own knife than anyone else's. Let us not forget that anyone carrying a knife has a choice not to carry a knife.

I will touch on the relevance of social media as an aggravating factor in the perpetuation of knife crime. Last week, I met the parents of Olly Stephens, who told me their horrific story. Their story is well known in the public domain but, my goodness, it is more harrowing when one of the parents reads out in person exactly what happened, and the raw emotion of the impact profoundly affects those in the room.

Olly was stabbed to death by two teenage boys in a field behind their house in Reading, after a gang recruited a girl online to lure him there. The entire attack had been planned on social media and triggered by a dispute in a social media chat group. In the words of Olly's father,

"They hunted him, tracked him, and executed him through social media."

This is another family who watched their son leave home, not realising that it would be the last time they would see him alive. A much-loved son killed at the mercy of a knife, perpetuated by social media—another reason to detoxify the world of social media.

I have secured this debate to highlight the story of Ryan and the escalating level of knife crime in the west midlands, and to emphasise that I will not let go of Ryan's story until justice is done. I realise that this falls outside the Minister's brief, but I think it is important that I comment on the perverse verdict in Ryan's case. The question is how we can accept our justice system is fair when we accept that juries can make mistakes and wrongly convict, and there is a mechanism to appeal a wrongful conviction; and yet we do not accept that the jury can make a wrongful acquittal decision, and there is currently no mechanism for appeal.

To put this in perspective, Ryan's family have already pursued legal action against Kobe Murray and won. In a civil case in November 2021, the judge agreed with the family that Kobe Murray was found responsible for killing Ryan. It was a landmark judgment. Just prior to that, in October 2021, in another significant breakthrough, the West Midlands police agreed to open an independent review into the police investigation into Ryan's death. The review is ongoing. I thank the West Yorkshire police for their diligence in exploring additional lines of inquiry, and I thank the deputy chief constable for the west midlands for making this happen. I hope that the Minister can help to signpost me to the correct Minister to continue those conversations with the family.

I never knew Ryan, but I knew of him, as the news of his death ricocheted across the west midlands. The moment I became an MP, it was a no-brainer that I wanted to help the family, but it was a hard slog trying to open the doors of bureaucracy to get people to listen to the injustice of Ryan's death. It took 16 to 18 months for anyone in the West Midlands police force to listen to me and even try to have that conversation. One by one, however, the doors are now opening up.

It is now five years of injustice for the Passey family. I have got to know them well, and I consider them friends. When I see them—Ade, Jill, Phil, Debbie and Jason—[*Interruption.*]

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is telling so well the story of what happens, even for us as Members of Parliament, when a tragic event such as this takes place in our constituency and we go out and meet the family. They will owe a huge debt of gratitude to my hon. Friend for the way in which she is campaigning for them and seeking justice.

Suzanne Webb: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. When I am with Ryan's parents, Ade and Jill, there is a moment every single time when I have to remind myself that every day, every hour, every minute and every second, they mourn the loss of their beloved son. They lost their only child to a heinous knife crime.

This year would have been Ryan's 30th birthday. I will be joining his family and friends as they celebrate his heavenly birthday in April. I will support them to the end of the earth, and then some, until they get the peace they deserve, which is justice for Ryan. To those who carry a knife, the simple truth is that they will either be the perpetrator of a knife crime or the victim, and those who carry knives have a simple choice not to do so. There is one other important truth: Ryan was not carrying a knife. His life tragically got caught up in what is quickly becoming an escalating horror story of knife crime in the west midlands. I urge the police and crime commissioner and West Midlands police to do more to ensure that no other family suffers as much as the Passey family have had to, and still do.

11.19 am

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) for securing this debate and giving such a powerful testimony about the terrible tragedies that she described. All of us here will want to remember the victims of the terrible crimes that she described: Ryan Passey, Cody Fisher, Bailey Atkinson, Akeem Francis-Kerr and Olly Stephens. Their deaths are a tragedy, and we will all want to remember them and convey to their families our very deepest sympathy. Every death is a tragedy, and each of them is mourned deeply by the families. It is our duty in public life to do everything that we can to try to protect families from similar tragedies occurring in the future.

Wendy Morton: The Minister is rightly naming a number of individuals. I would like him to acknowledge James Brindley—the son of Mark and Bev Brindley—who was stabbed to death in Aldridge, hence the James Brindley Foundation.

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend for mentioning the name of her constituent James Brindley. Each death is mourned deeply, and we must do everything that we can to try to prevent them from happening.

Confronting serious violence is clearly a priority for this Government, and it is a focus for the Home Office as well. The starting point for that must be to ensure that there are sufficient police officers and police resources available to enable the police to combat violence. As Members will know, we are in the middle of recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers across England and Wales, and once that programme has completed, which is due to happen by the end of this month, we will have more police officers in England and Wales, by some thousands, than we have ever had at any time in this country's history. Clearly, ensuring that those police officers are available to protect our streets and protect the public is a critical element in the fight against violent crime.

Marco Longhi: The Minister rightly emphasises that we are putting so much more resource into policing and recruiting so many more police officers to do the job that the people of this country deserve and need, but it is also true that police need the infrastructure—a place that they can call their own base. To be a little parochial—I hope that the Minister will forgive me—my predecessor announced that there would be a brand-new police station in Dudley in 2019, and the then police and crime commissioner said that it would be implemented. In 2023, we still do not have one. Where can these new police officers operate from when the previous police and crime commissioner closed all police stations, including the main police station in Dudley?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We have given police and crime commissioners resources. Next year, they will have, between them, over £500 million extra, and there will be more money for the west midlands as well. I understand that the West Midlands police and crime commissioner is even today looking at closing up to 20 police stations across the west midlands, which is a terrible mistake, and I certainly do not support those plans at all. I urge the West Midlands police and crime commissioner to think again about the closures that he is contemplating. I have heard Members today make the case that perhaps the powers currently exercised by the west midlands police and crime commissioner might be better exercised by the directly elected Mayor of the West Midlands. I will take that proposal away and consider it very carefully, given the serious problems that have been outlined.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge mentioned some of the serious problems with knife crime and violent crime in the west midlands, which are rightly of deep concern to Members of Parliament across the region. The problems are particularly stark given that they run against the national trend. The most reliable measure of crime is the crime survey for England and Wales, which is the only source of crime data authorised by the Office for National Statistics. Since March 2010, violent crime across England and Wales has fallen by 38%, from 1.84 million offences to 1.15 million. When it comes to measuring violent crime where a knife is involved, the Home Office has been tracking admissions to hospital with a knife injury, and since 2019 they have dropped by around 20%. I am deeply concerned to hear

that in the west midlands the trend appears to be going in the opposite direction. It is right that my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge and others are raising this issue.

I have mentioned the additional resources being given to policing. We are also investing in prevention; in particular, violence reduction units have received £64 million. Those entail identifying people, particularly young people, in danger of following the wrong path, and intervening by ensuring they stay in education, have the right social care if they need it and providing them with alternative activities, such as sport. I visited Everton and the community on Merseyside in Liverpool last week to look at a scheme that is being funded there that also helped young people into employment.

Violence reductions units are critical, as is the Grip programme, which is a hotspot policing initiative funded by the Government, identifying geographical areas where there is a high risk of violent crime and patrolling and policing them heavily. Where that is done, it dramatically reduces crime. Interestingly, it does not displace crime somewhere else; it actually reduces it. I strongly encourage police and crime commissioners around the country to pursue the violence reduction unit and Grip initiatives. The west midlands receives funding to do those things, as would be expected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge raised a few questions. One of them was about sentencing for knife crime, and that is an extremely good question. We want to have strong deterrents for knife crime possession. Members will know that the maximum sentence for possessing a knife—or a “bladed article”, as the law describes it—is four years' imprisonment. We recently legislated through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to strengthen the presumption, making it near certain that if someone is convicted for a second time carrying a bladed article, the court will impose a minimum six-month custodial sentence for adults, or a four-month detention and training order sentence for 16 and 17-year-olds. We have strengthened the law in this area to ensure that the consequences that follow knife crime are strong. The deterrent effect that my hon. Friend described is very important.

My hon. Friend also asked a couple of questions relating to the trial of Ryan Passey's killer, and the jury acquittal that occurred. She asked me if I could signpost her towards the Ministers responsible for policy in that area. The policy around that sits with the Ministry of Justice. The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, or the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who has responsibility for courts, would be the right people to approach regarding that policy. Provision in the Crown Prosecution Service's guidance states that in exceptional circumstances, it can seek a retrial, where there is new compelling evidence that was not available at the time of the original trial. It is possible to seek the quashing of an acquittal, but that is extremely rare. I hope that gives my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge some assistance when she is thinking about who else to speak to.

We have heard harrowing stories this morning about the devastating effect of knife crime on people's lives—particularly those of young people—in the west midlands, but clearly it applies elsewhere as well. Nationally, the Government are doing everything they can in terms of

more police officers, funding violence reduction units, Grip hotspot policing, diversionary activities and stronger sentences for knife possession. Police and crime commissioners also play a critical role by using those resources in their local areas in a way that is appropriate and wise. I strongly commend my hon. Friend and her colleagues for shining a light on this issue. The Home Office will do everything it can to work with her and colleagues to fight this abominable crime.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Single-Parent Families

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for single parent families.

There are a number of measures the Government preside over to the detriment of single parents, and I will come to some of them in a moment. However, the crux of the argument lies in the fact that the Government are failing single-parent families—they are failing the children and they are failing the parents.

In 2021, there were 3 million single-parent families in the UK. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2023 annual report, 40% of children in lone-parent families are living in poverty. That statistic should concern us all, and it demonstrates just how necessary this debate is. Being a single parent can make someone more vulnerable, and unexpected changes, such as the chaos of covid or the increasing cost of living, can have a huge impact on the quality of life of not only the children but the whole family. Shared Parenting Scotland told me yesterday that its evidence shows that, under this Government's social security system, both parents end up worse off financially when they split up.

I predict that the Minister will give me a blow-by-blow account of everything the Tory Government are already doing, but the point of this debate is that what they are doing is not working. It is failing families, and single-parent families in particular. I will break this down into two categories: what the Government are already doing and need to do better to support single-parent families, and where the Government are being more of a hindrance than a help to single-parent families.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In 2019-20, 34% of children in single-parent households were in relative poverty, compared with 20% of children in a household with a couple. That is an unacceptable gap. At a cost of only £1.3 billion, scrapping the two-child limit on benefits would lift 250,000 children out of poverty and mean that 850,000 children were in less deep poverty. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is something the Chancellor should look to include in his Budget this week?

Amy Callaghan: I absolutely agree with everything the hon. Lady just said, but I would go one step further and also scrap the benefit cap, which would lift 300,000 children out of poverty across the UK.

To come back to my two categories, the second was where the Government are being more of a hindrance than a help to single-parent families. In that category, I will put the Child Maintenance Service, the two-child policy, as outlined by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), the benefit cap and the rape clause. The two-child limit disproportionately affects women, as they are much more likely to be single parents than men. Some 47% of the families affected by the two-child limit are single-parent families. As I just outlined, it is estimated that removing the two-child limit and the benefit cap would lift 300,000 children out of poverty. I call on the Government to scrap each of those policies to help single-parent families.

[Amy Callaghan]

I am keen to hear the Minister's defence of the Child Maintenance Service, which puts vulnerable parents—mainly women—at risk of further manipulation from an abusive ex-partner. Not being assigned a designated case worker can cause the parent receiving the maintenance to relive trauma, with each conversation rehashing their situation and the breakdown of the previous relationship. CMS is a deeply flawed service that lets down single-parent families time and again. The entire service needs to be reviewed, and I call on the Government to conduct a root-and-branch review of it to make it more suitable and functional for parents. I am keen to hear whether the Minister is considering that point, given the number of times it has been raised with the Department.

The young parent penalty is also worth discussing. The arbitrary setting of two levels of universal credit seriously disadvantages those under 25—especially young parents—and to what end? This issue has been raised with the Department since the introduction of universal credit, most notably when over 100 organisations wrote to a former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about it, yet there has still been no movement for young single parents. They have the same financial responsibilities as other parents but receive approximately £66 a month less.

I will move on to where the Government need to change their current stance, which seems to be well-intentioned but is falling short. We in the SNP welcome the inflationary increase to benefits, but it is just not enough for single-parent families, who are disproportionately affected by inflation, given that most of their income is spent on food and energy. It is crucial that any additional money gets into families' pockets urgently, so the fact that the increase is being implemented only in April is an unnecessary and harmful delay.

That leads me on to tomorrow's Budget. It is expected that the energy price guarantee will remain at £2,500, which is welcome, but our constituents, and particularly single-parent families, are still struggling to pay their bills. We need bolder action from the Government to keep money in people's pockets now, rather than have it lining the pockets of energy companies.

The Government could act on one of the SNP's Budget calls—cutting the energy price guarantee to £2,000 and maintaining the energy bill support scheme until the summer. This would save families £1,400 on energy bills, which would be a much-needed saving for families, and particularly single-parent families.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that, of all the groups of people in poverty, children and others in lone-parent families are the most likely to suffer food insecurity. This means that single-parent families are often among the most vulnerable people in our society. Approximately a fifth of households in my constituency think they will have to use a food bank. This appalling statistic speaks volumes about the Government's record on social security. Choosing to crack down on benefit fraud—most of which is caused by continual error in the Department, with it paying people too much—instead of getting money into people's pockets so that they can afford to live is utterly shameful.

Gingerbread has found that single parents experience higher unemployment rates than couple parents, despite having the same desire to work. It found that those single parents who do work often want to work more

hours than they are able to and must frequently abandon their career aspirations to take on work that better fits in with childcare arrangements and school hours. This means that many of them are on lower incomes than they would otherwise be. It also means that, at a time when employers are struggling to fill vacancies, they miss out on the potential of single parents, because of the way they structure roles. Although childcare costs are a key barrier in terms of single parents getting into work, those parents are also held back significantly by the shortfall of suitable, flexible, part-time jobs and a lack of tailored employment support from Jobcentre Plus.

The Scottish Government are providing almost £3 billion in this financial year to help households face the increased cost of living, including £1 billion to provide services and financial support that are not available anywhere else in the UK. That includes increasing the Scottish child payment by 150% to £25 per week per child. Has the Minister considered introducing a similar policy? We have also doubled our fuel insecurity fund to £20 million.

The SNP Scottish Government consider social security as an investment in people that is key to our national mission to tackle child poverty, and we are using the limited powers and fixed budgets we have to support children and their families. However, there is only so much that devolved Governments can do to support single-parent families when 85% of welfare expenditure and income-replacement benefits remain reserved here.

In 2021, the Children's Commissioners for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland wrote to the UK Government to call on them to scrap the two-child limit, which demonstrates that this policy is widely condemned across these four nations. So I ask again: will the Minister consider scrapping the two-child policy alongside the benefit cap?

Roughly 120,000 children in the UK receive no child maintenance, and many more do not receive their full entitlement, so it is abundantly clear that the CMS is not sufficiently protecting these children. I would be keen to hear what the Minister has to say about that policy and what defence for it can he bring to the table. In my eyes and those of the SNP, it is indefensible?

To summarise, the UK Government are failing single-parent families; they could do far more to step up to the plate and help to support them. We need far more action, and far bolder action, from the UK Government to mirror the radical, bold action the Scottish Government are taking to tackle the levels of child and family poverty.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob up and down if they want to attract my attention to speak in the debate. I call Jim Shannon.

2.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often I get called first in a debate in Westminster Hall. The reason I have been today is that I am the only Back Bencher—I hope that augurs better for the future. It was a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) putting forward the issues for single-parent families.

Over many years in my constituency, and particularly over the past three years, I have dealt with mothers who have valiantly looked after their children in the face of

financial difficulties. The hon. Lady ably outlined that case and the problems for constituents, and I look forward to hearing what the two shadow Ministers—the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern)—and particularly the Minister have to say. I am not saying that to give the Minister a big head, but because I believe he understands the issues we are referring to. I know from my deliberations with him, and from those of others, that he shows understanding and compassion, and provides help, for those who are under pressure, vulnerable and finding life difficult. When he responds at the end, I am fairly confident—without writing his script for him—that he will be able to address some of the issues and concerns that we have.

We stand up for these lone parents. Every Member here will be aware of the struggles they have had over the past couple of months and—let us be honest—over the past three years, as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned. Covid brought the extra pressure of living together and not being able to go out. It brought the pressure of ill health and put pressure on finances, with people not being able to work and earn money for the family. Children must have the best start in life, and parents feel the utmost responsibility to ensure that they can give them that. Every parent—mum or dad—can give their child that start in life and put them on the road to a successful future.

Margaret Ferrier: Single parents want to be a good role model for their children but, in reality, they often experience long periods of unemployment, are unable to work all the hours they want, are forced to accept lower-paid jobs and may have to put their career aspirations aside in their child's early years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the impact that that can have on a single parent's mental wellbeing should not be overlooked? That would influence how the child feels in that relationship.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Yes, I do concur with that, because I have seen it in my constituency. People have come to me in times of torment and difficulty, when the pressure is very much upon them. With that in mind, we have to look not only at the financial help we give but at the broader picture of mental health and anxiety issues and at family support, when that is needed.

Parents' guilt due to the current financial situation has left them no choice but to scrape their last pennies together to put a meal on the table. I am sorry to have to say that that is the reality. It is not the Government's fault, by the way, but the nature of society and of what has happened over the past two or three years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. He is making an excellent speech, and we will all have heard many excellent speeches—as I am sure we will in this debate—about the experiences of single parents and their children. I am proud to be the child of a single mother. The hon. Member mentioned the word “guilt” and my mother grew up with a lot of guilt for being a single parent. Does he agree that we need to celebrate single parents? We need to support them and celebrate the diverse and different families we have—be that two mothers, two fathers, a mum and a dad, just a mum, just a dad, or those who are looked after. Single parents are truly heroes. We need to ensure

that all Governments do everything they can to support them through what the hon. Member describes as incredibly difficult times.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady brings personal experience to the debate, which we all acknowledge. At the end of my contribution I am going to say just how much I admire single parents. I want to say that because the ones I meet regularly in my office are the ones who deliver each week. They are the ones who scrape and save and perhaps go without a meal. They do not get the help they need, when they need it. The hon. Lady is right about the parents who struggle and scrape to save every penny. They also give a level of love and affection to their children that helps build them up to enter society.

It is always a pleasure to come and tell some stories from Strangford, in Northern Ireland. That is not because Strangford is any different from anywhere else, but because it replicates every other constituency across the whole of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Office for National Statistics estimates that there are just under 3 million single-parent households across the UK, which equates to 15%. That is a big figure when we think of the pressures that those 3 million households are under.

Amy Callaghan: The hon. Member is a very good friend, and I thank him for giving way. On the note that all Members in this House have significant amounts of casework on this issue, does he recognise that they have cases relating to the CMS that have not been resolved over a number of years, because the Department is stalling on fixing the grave issues with the child maintenance system?

Jim Shannon: I do, and the Minister has responded on that on a number of occasions. I hope he will take the chance today to respond—I am quite sure he will. It is good to reinforce issues on behalf of our constituents. Child maintenance payments are incredibly difficult. Sometimes there is an absent father who, in drastic circumstances, may leave his job to reduce his income so that he does not have to give a contribution to his wife and children. I find that absolutely disgraceful. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire puts down a marker in relation to that.

There are fathers I have known over the years who seem to have a portfolio of buildings and properties but who for some reason do not make their child maintenance payments in the way they should. I find that incredibly frustrating. We are seeking from the Minister some methodology to feed in that information so that urgent action can be taken. I think that is what the hon. Member would like to see; it is certainly what I would like to see.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Member for being so generous with his time. I attended a Council of Europe event yesterday on the Istanbul convention and its importance. One of the issues that was raised by women from across Europe and beyond was the abuse of single parents, and particularly single mothers, through the court system by former partners. Does he agree that we need to ensure that every system in every Government supports mothers who are trying to protect their children from violent men?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do, and there is no excuse for not protecting them. I hope that there is understanding and compassion in the courts to ensure that families are protected—there needs to be. The anxiety of the occasion can also put extra pressure on families.

The latest data from the family resources survey found that 50% of single-parent families were claiming income-related benefits in 2020 and 2021. One of my staff members has been working for me for over 10 years as a benefits adviser. I could not do without her; her knowledge of the benefits system is phenomenal, as is the money that she is able to get for those who are under pressure. Mr Paisley, I think one of your staff members is equally helpful to you and has managed to get back a substantial, seven-figure amount. We cannot do without them. My staff member does her very best daily to advise and assist those single-parent families who are in need. There are many who are in need.

Single-parent families are over-represented among benefit claimants. The survey also revealed that single parents are more likely to be in poverty. Child poverty levels in Northern Ireland are running at 30%. You and I know that, Mr Paisley, through our workloads in our offices. There is no doubt that single parents are in a highly difficult position. The cost of living has increased the price of more or less everything. No matter what it is, the price is up. Food, electricity, oil, gas, school uniforms, childcare and transport have all dramatically increased in price over the last couple of months. To be fair, that is due to many things beyond the Government's control, including Ukraine, energy prices and other problems with the movement of goods.

I have said this before, but in my office I have seen an increase in the number of food-bank parcel referrals since last September and October. It is not just those in a lower income bracket, but those in the middle class who are affected. People I refer to as the working poor are also under pressure. I would go as far as saying that at the peak of the cost of living crisis, we were referring 30-plus families every week for assistance, when we used to refer around 10. The Thriving Life food bank tells me that out of all the referrals, the most come from my office. My staff are excellent at dealing with people in a compassionate way and assuring them of support. Vulnerable people feel that we're a bit more confident when they leave the office with some way forward. We try to help them with that.

It saddens me that those who are in need are often embarrassed to ask for help. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) is right. There should never be any shame in not having a level of income. Never should someone have to excuse themselves or apologise for that. When times are tough, we do our best to ease the burden on struggling families, especially single parents. It is my duty as an MP—as an elected representative—and as a person who has compassion, to respond positively and to help people whenever they need it.

I have heard of numerous child maintenance issues in my office over the last five years. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire referred to that. The main issue is that single parents simply do not feel that the payments are doing any justice, given how expensive things are. Whenever they get them, they are too small. Whenever they are agreed, they have not caught up with inflation. As another example, some parents look after their

children and have them to stay six nights a week. They say to me that maintenance payments simply do not do any justice to the situation. I ask the Minister what extra help we can give to those families under financial pressure, particularly at this time.

The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that there are around 2.3 million separated families in Great Britain, and 3.6 million children living in such families. Here is a shocking figure: around 40% of those families were estimated to have no child maintenance arrangement at all. Wow—that is 40% of them with nowhere to go. I always ask questions to be constructive and helpful. What can the Government and the Minister do to help that 40% without child maintenance? Whether it is direct contact or special help for them, we certainly have much to do.

In Northern Ireland specifically, more than a quarter of the children born last year were born into a single-parent household. Just shy of 1,200 babies—5%—were registered by their mother alone with no record of a father, because that is what the person wanted. A further 5,154 babies—21%—had details of a dad, but one living at a different address. Those are probably most of the people who come to see me in my office.

Our social security and welfare state must do right by single parents. There should be no stigma or shame. The hon. Member for Livingston is right. Those people have come through hard times to rear a family when they were the only person producing anything in the house. Single parents do a fantastic job providing for their kids. That should never be taken away from them. Indeed, we should underline that and say how well they are doing to encourage them, give them confidence and help them move forward. Sometimes in life, people need that wee extra boost, extra nudge or bit of help. I underline that statement—they do a fantastic job providing for their kids, and that should never be taken away from them.

These are trying times. They are hard times. In my lifetime, it has never been like it has been over the last three to four years. We are living in an environment where parents—this is a fact—are skipping meals to ensure that their children are fed. That is the reality I deal with in my office every week.

Through my staff members who deal with benefit issues for my constituents in Strangford, I am aware that the UK social security system offers great support. We thank the Minister and the Government for what they are doing, but when we are confronted with extra problems, which are galloping away from us, we look to those who provide to help more.

It is important that those who are parenting individually know that they can turn somewhere for advice and support. Is there any direct help and support for those parents? They can turn to the offices of MPs and elected representatives and we then refer them to the Government for help as well. The rise in the cost of living is having an impact on everyone, but some are more vulnerable than others. We deal with the more vulnerable every day. We must do better to help them through.

The Minister is a compassionate man—one who feels for the vulnerable and hard-pressed single parents. I know he does, and I hope that he will outline a number of steps that he will take, which we can pass on to our constituents. I ask that all the information and all the help is made available so that we can help those who need help more.

On other subjects, we often say we are a voice for the voiceless. We are also a conduit—a door—for those who need help. I look to the Minister for support and help, so that we can grasp the way in which we can help our constituents to deal with the pressures of the day.

2.57 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As always, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for securing the debate. It is timely to consider the impact that the cost of living crisis has had on one-parent families on the eve of the Chancellor presenting his Budget to Parliament.

Earlier this afternoon, I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on poverty. We heard a number of testimonies, including from single parents, on some of the changes that they would like to see to the social security system. I use the phrase “social security system” very deliberately. Likewise, the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, on which I sit, is embarking on an inquiry into the adequacy of benefits in the UK.

All those points feed into the juncture we find ourselves in at the moment. We know from public polling that there is now consensus in public opinion that the current social security system is inadequate—a point that has been made a number of times today. Perhaps that is because they saw the benefits system—the social security system—for the first time during the pandemic.

The inescapable reality is that families of single parents—90% of whom are women; let us not forget or gloss over that point—with children are more likely to be in poverty. Any reduction in income is likely to be particularly harmful, which means that, in the face of the ongoing cost of living crisis, the British Government must do more—so much more—to protect children from poverty. In doing so, Ministers must urgently address the barriers to work that single parent families face. My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire and others have touched on the fact that childcare is a big barrier.

The SNP has been calling for a long-overdue root-and-branch review of the Child Maintenance Service, to make it work more effectively for the children whom it is supposed to serve. The Select Committee heard evidence from Viscount Younger of Leckie fairly recently, which did not inspire me that the Government are getting to grips with some of the issues in the Child Maintenance Service. My constituency postbag certainly reflects that.

North of the border, the SNP Government are using their devolved powers to try to ensure that children and families are supported during this difficult time. They are working hard to prevent them from being pushed into further hardship but, again, it is an undeniable fact that the Government in Edinburgh are very much operating with one hand tied behind their back due to the limitations of the current constitutional settlement on these islands.

To be blunt, for all the good that my colleagues can do with the Scottish child payment, to name just one example, it is the intransigence of this Westminster Government that actively hinders our ability to adequately lift one-parent families out of poverty. For example, the Scottish Government can do things such as bringing forward that game-changing Scottish child payment of £25 a week, but when the UK Government take away that extra £20 universal credit uplift, it almost wipes it out.

Hannah Bardell: I want to pick up the point my hon. Friend is making about the Scottish child payment and the profound impact that it is having. Many of my Livingston constituents have told me what a huge impact it has had. I compare those experiences, although they are profound, to my mum’s experience. She talked about being double taxed. She was taxed on her income and, when she paid her childminder, she was taxed on that income. Many women faced that, and still face that in other parts of the UK, but in Scotland, at least, we are doing what we can with the limited powers that we have.

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on; it is about how devolved powers are used. I will come on to that and the question of what devolution is for, but she is right to praise the Scottish child payment. It is something on which we have managed to get cross-party consensus. One of the few things that I have enjoyed about the SNP leadership debate, which has been absolutely terrible in my view, has been watching the candidates try to outbid each other on the Scottish child payment. That is a good thing; we should always strive to do more to protect families and children. The fact that it is so much the focus of that debate can only be a good thing. It has been a ray of light in what has been an otherwise dreary contest.

We know that inflation disproportionately impacts low-income groups such as single parents, who spend a relatively high proportion of their income on food and fuel. According to the Resolution Foundation, the poorest tenth of households experienced an inflation rate of 11.7%. It is against that worrying backdrop that I remain concerned about the British Government’s approach to social security. I do not want to be churlish; of course, any additional support is welcome, but these kinds of one-off payments are only a temporary fix. Permanent solutions are needed. Rather than offering one-off payments to shore up the incomes of struggling families, the Government should reverse the damaging long-term policies that are impacting the most vulnerable. That is why I will not tire of calling on the Government to reinstate the universal credit uplift, and, indeed, to increase it to £25 a week and extend it to all means-tested legacy benefits.

At 1 o’clock, the APPG on poverty took evidence from the Disability Benefits Consortium and we remained baffled as to why the 2.5 million disabled people on these islands were completely overlooked and forgotten during the pandemic when that £20 uplift was put in place. Ministers need to go further than that. They need to scrap the benefit cap entirely and get rid of the immoral and heartless two-child limit, which is utterly incompatible with the Government’s own family test. In this place, we rightly talk about the importance of a compassionate society—even the Conservatives. There is this thing, I believe, called compassionate conservatism. I do not know how a two-child limit is in any way compatible with compassionate conservatism.

Amy Callaghan: Does my hon. Friend consider that the rape clause and the benefit cap do not align with their vision of a compassionate society at all?

David Linden: Exactly. Quite rightly, my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire should not be sparing the blushes of the Conservatives, who are mandated to turn up to this debate—that is why there are two of

[David Linden]

them here. The reality is that there cannot be a compassionate social security system when there is this arbitrary cap in place that takes no cognisance of the cost of living. It is not compatible with a compassionate society to turn around and say, “We’ll pay for the first two children, but, by the way, do you see that third one? Out on their ear.” It certainly is not compatible with a compassionate society to turn around to women who have experienced rape and sexual violence and conceived a child as a result and say, “Okay. You have told us that this third child was born as a result of rape. Can you prove that?” That is my question to the two Conservatives who are here. Perhaps that is a problem; that got through the policy process. Was it two white men sitting there thinking, “This policy is absolutely fine”? I can tell the House that the women I speak to at Glasgow East Women’s Aid in my constituency are appalled that, years and years on, we have the abhorrent rape clause. I know that Ministers find this issue incredibly uncomfortable, and they often tell me, “Don’t refer to it as a rape clause.” They want to refer to it by its official name, which is the non-consensual sex exemption. Let us just think about that for a minute: in 2023, the state asks women in this country to prove that they have been raped, simply so they can get state support. It really should shame the Government.

Some 86% of households trapped by the benefit cap are families, often headed by single mothers—the very people we are debating today—and it is the Government’s job to support families, not to subject them to further hardship. The Minister and the Government can and must do better. They should take heed of the wise words of John Dickie of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, who calls for the

“cruel and irrational benefit cap...to be scrapped at source by the UK Government as a matter of utmost urgency.”

Those are not my words as a nasty, nationalist MP. They are the words of John Dickie of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland—somebody who is a respected expert in this field—and the Minister would do well to reflect on that.

The continued refusal of Ministers to fix the extensive and known problems with universal credit is unacceptable, and it is clearly subjecting vulnerable people to wholly unnecessary hardship. Even more damning is the fact that this hardship has been noted outwith these islands. The Government like to fly around the world—it was San Diego yesterday—on Union Jack-clad private jets and talk about the importance of global Britain, but let us look at global Britain. A recent report from the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) is a member, found that the level of support provided under universal credit was a key contributing factor to child poverty. The report, published in November, stated that policies such as the two-child limit and the benefit cap

“restrict the amount of benefits a household can receive, regardless of their specific needs, and thereby continue to exacerbate child poverty.”

In its recent submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Human Rights Watch also gives a damning review of the British Government’s restrictive social security policies, such as

the two-child limit and the failure to reverse the cut to universal credit, and sets out their negative impact on the right to an adequate standard of living—things such as food and housing for families with children.

I want to refer briefly to the wonderful folks at One Parent Families Scotland, because they have been campaigning for an awfully long time to end the benefits-related discrimination against single parents under the age of 25. People under 25 are entitled to a lower allowance of benefits than those aged 25 or over, but before the introduction of universal credit there was an exemption for single parents in recognition of the costs of caring for a child alone. Now that the exemption has been removed, children are certainly paying the price. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire set out, young single-parent families are now up to £66.13 worse off per month under universal credit compared with the legacy system, which equates to a drop of 20%. Denying young single parents—largely women—the same level of social security penalises children on the basis of their parent’s age and pushes young families into poverty, with an incredibly detrimental impact on their rights and wellbeing. It frustrates me that Scottish Government officials rightly talk about getting things right for every child, yet baked into the social security system is an inherent unfairness.

It is one thing for me to stand here and quote respected committees, international bodies and think-tanks, but I want to highlight some local examples from the east end of Glasgow, which I am incredibly proud to live in and represent. Last week, I was joined in Tollcross by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn). While we were at Tollcross advice centre, Matthew Leach, the financial inclusion officer, told me of several examples—he even provided me with case studies—that highlight the folly of the UK’s current social security system. Time constraints mean that I cannot read them all out, but I will certainly send them to the Minister’s office this afternoon to highlight just how challenging the Government’s policy makes life for single parents in these islands.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has said, life is hard enough for everyone right now—the cost of living crisis means that everyone is having to do more with less—but we know from today’s testimony alone that life is particularly hard right now for single parents, and the fact that the British Government are making life harder only adds insult to injury.

In conclusion, Westminster must do better. If it will not, an independent Scottish Government stand ready to step in and fulfil their obligations to families, whatever shape, size or format they come in.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister, Alison McGovern.

3.10 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) on securing this important debate. She made a very good speech, highlighting many of the issues that single parents face. We also heard strong contributions from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow East (David Linden), who ran through a number of important issues.

My nan, who died in August, was made a single parent at the age of 40 by the sad death of my grandfather when my mum was 14. I saw her work her fingers to the bone for years. That is the main message of my contribution today: single parents in this country work so hard. They work hard to care for their kids and to bring them up really well, despite the odds sometimes being stacked against them, and they work really hard in their job, committing and offering their skills and talents, because they know that they have to work harder to get the same recognition. Single parents in the United Kingdom work really hard, and I think it is incumbent on the Government to support them a little better than is the case at the moment. It is with hope that I say that single parents work really hard and ought to be backed by the Government. I am pretty sure that the Minister will agree with that sentiment. It is a cross-party idea that single parents are deserving of our support, and I hope that he will agree with that, too.

Hon. Members have raised important issues about the Child Maintenance Service—what it does and does not do, how that could be improved and, if it were improved, how that would help with incomes. Members also raised matters relating to domestic abuse. We know that too many people are struggling and that, sometimes, the way the state operates does not help. But I want to focus on single parents in work, because, despite recent decreases in their employment, a large majority of single parents are working.

The Government often say that employment is the best route out of poverty. I worry that that is not true at the moment. I think we should want it to be true—I think that everyone deserves employment with dignity, self-respect and a decent pay packet. That is true for single parents just as it is for everybody else. Unfortunately, at the moment, 41% of children in working single-parent families are in poverty, including 27% of families where the parent is working full time and 54% where the parent is working part time. We have known for years that being part of a single-parent family puts a child at much greater risk of poverty, even where their parent is working hard. That is why we need to focus on the areas where we can remove barriers to work for single parents and, at the same time, think about how to get them better-paid jobs and help them to do more with their skills, so that their time and talent are not wasted.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Lady on her excellent contribution. One issue, which the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned, is childcare. We hope that in the Budget tomorrow the Chancellor of the Exchequer might announce some extra help with that. Without that help, single parents are under even more severe financial pressure than other families, so that is really important.

Alison McGovern: Yes. If you are a single parent and you are on an income that is too low, what do you do? There are only so many hours in the day and somebody needs to care for the children while you are at work. Without a really good childcare system in this country, single-parent families are always going to be behind everybody else. There are myriad reasons why we need to sort childcare in the United Kingdom, and this is one of the key features. We have a shortage of people in the labour market, so we cannot let anybody's time or talent go to waste.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. The sad reality for many single parents is that working in even a very good job does not pay enough to make them better off than they would be if they stayed at home, because of the cost of childcare. For many parents, that is at the root of their ability not even to work and thrive, but just to survive.

Alison McGovern: Of course, the hon. Lady is right. The knock-on effect for British businesses is really quite big, because they are missing out on all the talent that exists in single-parent families.

The United Kingdom has a good story on single-parent employment, which has been on a generally upward trend since the mid-1990s, having previously been falling since 1979. In 1997, 45% of single parents worked; by 2010, that had risen by 12 percentage points to 57%. I am not sure what happened between 1997 and 2010, but I think it was probably quite good.

That was obviously a bit of a joke about the Labour Government and how they were brilliant on lone-parent employment, particularly in relation to jobcentres, which I will come to. The numbers have continued to grow, which is good; again, I hope that represents a cross-party consensus. Worryingly, however, single-parent employment has fallen since 2019. We need to focus on it again and work out how to turn that around.

Single parents are also likely to be underemployed. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), many single parents could do more and offer more to our economy if childcare were available. We know that single parents are more likely to be women, and the kind of work that women are more likely to do militates against their having better pay. We need to work on employment segregation. The jobs that women do mean they end up being paid less, which has a massive knock-on effect on single parents. If we could change that so that women's time and talent were valued properly, as they should be in our economy, we would give single parents and, crucially, their children a much better chance.

Childcare has been mentioned because it is the glaringly obvious cause of many of the challenges that single parents face in our economy. The Institute for Fiscal Studies points out that there are at least eight different programmes to help with the cost of childcare and many families are eligible for more than one form of support simultaneously. That complexity makes it hard to understand what someone is eligible for. However, despite the plethora of schemes, the supply of childcare is not really any good, because there are failures in the way that the schemes run.

We need to have a root-and-branch look at childcare. We are all hopeful that we might hear something in the Budget. There are things, such as reforming the way it works through universal credit, that we could have done already. Labour wants to invest in breakfast clubs, which could be funded by savings that we have identified from changing tax arrangements for non-doms. That would help single parents to do a job that starts at 9 am and give them a lot more flexibility.

In addition to the extremely important issue of childcare, our success as a nation in helping single parents to have a choice of jobs and success in employment was driven by Jobcentre Plus services. In recent years, I have worried

[Alison McGovern]

that the focus on supporting single parents has declined. I hope that is not the case, but we need to make improvements. Gingerbread found recently that just a third of single parents agreed that contact with Jobcentre Plus was personalised and relevant to their specific situation. That is not great. Lone parents face specific barriers, and they need specialised support. Gingerbread found a lack of continuity in relationships with work coaches, and that people were being pushed to apply for unsuitable jobs. That is problematic. We know that Jobcentre Plus works best when it provides tailored and specific support.

Of course, we also need workplaces to change, with more part-time and flexible working. Will the Minister say how he sees the DWP making that happen? Do the Department's own flexible working policies support single parents? What does the Department advise work coaches to suggest to employers on flexible or part-time work to support single parents? There is a huge amount of skill and life experience available to businesses, if only they can ensure that the employment they are offering is fully inclusive. There is no better time to address this. We have businesses crying out for staff. Why not look for talent in single-parent families?

We await tomorrow's Budget, and I live in hope that we will see expansive, brilliant childcare reform that will really help—I am slightly sceptical after 13 years in this place, although perhaps my Pollyanna-ish tendencies should be tempered with a bit more scepticism—but whatever happens tomorrow, we also need action far beyond childcare, including reform to the support that Jobcentre Plus offers; improved public transport, because fewer single parents are likely to have their own car; and big changes on flexible working, so that everybody is fully included. In this time of staff shortages, making employment more inclusive and ensuring that it involves more people would be a big win, which could help our labour market to be sustainable into the future. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say as a precursor to tomorrow's excitement.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Pollyanna-ish is the word of the day. I call the Minister.

3.22 pm

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): Well, it is the word of the day so far. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It is an honour to respond to this debate secured by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). We are in Brain Tumour Awareness Month; I know she did not suffer a tumour as such, but as a fellow recoverer from neurosurgery, I join her in celebrating the month. We say many thanks to Headway and the Stroke Association, which have done great work supporting her, and I put on the record my thanks to the Brain Tumour Charity, the National Brain Appeal and Brain Tumour Research, which have done great work supporting me, and to Neil Kitchen, who, with a very small chainsaw on my head, performed the operation that kept me alive after I collapsed in Central Lobby in 2011.

I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate on an important issue, which I want to try to address in some detail. I accept the dubious honour of being the

warm-up man for the Chancellor tomorrow, and there were many and varied pitches to him. I note those by the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for East Dunbartonshire, for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I will come on to his points on childcare—and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), and by the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

The hon. Member for Livingston made the good point that we should celebrate single parents. I utterly endorse that. In this moment of personal reflection, I put on the record my thanks to my mum. When my parents split up, she brought me and my brother up alone. She is presently disabled, just out of hospital and very unwell. She worked for MI6 when not many women were entitled to do that. I will be getting her into trouble for revealing that piece of information, but I think she is safe from any retribution from the security services.

Without a shadow of a doubt, we need to celebrate and support those who have the honour and distinction of ploughing a lonely furrow in trying to ensure that upbringing is done in the most appropriate way possible, to the best of their ability, in circumstances not necessarily of their own choosing. We all understand it is complicated.

There are a number of points I need to address, but I want to start with the overarching point, which is the degree of support that the Government have provided over the last couple of years and will provide on an ongoing basis. I think that it contextualises the individual benefits and support that already exist. Clearly, we have to take in mind the Chancellor's autumn statement, which reflected our commitment to support families across the UK, setting out a series of measures on top of the £37 billion announced in May 2022. About 8 million households on means-tested benefits such as universal credit will receive payments of up to £900, and obviously state pensions and benefits will increase by 10.1%, increasing expenditure on social security and benefit pension rates by £22 billion for 2023-24.

It is fair to note that we have never spent as much as we spend on the welfare system in this country; we are spending record levels.

David Linden: Politicians always like to twist statistics, but if we compare what we spend as a proportion of average earnings, is it not the case that we are pretty much back to the days of Lloyd George in terms of our spending on social security?

Guy Opperman: I manifestly disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I do not have my Lloyd George statistics to hand, but given that the welfare spend in the times of Lloyd George was effectively minimal and that we are now spending £245 billion through the welfare system in 2023, including £108 billion on people of working age, record sums on the state pension and record sums on the disabled, I suspect that the House of Commons Library would be delighted to correct the hon. Gentleman on the error of his Lloyd Georgian ways. Of course, were I to be mistaken, I would be delighted to be corrected by the Library.

I was not expecting the hon. Gentleman to rely on Lloyd George in support of the Scottish National party cause. I noted with interest and curiosity his description of his three colleagues who are running for the SNP

leadership as dreary—or of the process as being dreary. I could not possibly comment. I am sure that they will be able replacements for Nicola Sturgeon. The statistics and the polls show that independence is a whole lot less likely than it was three months ago, but I am sure that the winner will turn things around in a heartbeat.

Amy Callaghan: I think the Minister might want to correct the record on support for independence—we are in a much better place than we were just a couple of weeks ago—and get back to the subject of single-parent families.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. The debate is on single-parent families, not independence or the candidates for leader of the Scottish National party.

Guy Opperman: I utterly endorse that very strong steer. I have no intention of correcting any record because I stand by the statistics.

On spending, there is also the energy price guarantee, which will be extended until the end of March 2024; a typical household bill will be around £3,000 per year as a result of that support. For those needing extra support, we will be providing an additional £1 billion to help with the cost of household essentials this year, bringing total support to £2.5 billion since October 2021. There is also an extension of the household support fund backed by £842 million for 2023-24, and devolved Administrations receive funding that totals £158 million through the Barnett formula.

Much was said about childcare, and I want to address it in a bit of detail. While there is, of course, intense speculation about what may or may not happen tomorrow, it is relevant to make the point that, since 2010, we have taken a system of almost non-existent childcare in this country to a substantial, comprehensive and broad-ranging offer. For example, in 2010 there was no 85% universal credit childcare, and parents could not receive the paid-for 15 or 30 hours of childcare. Universal credit claimants can claim back up to 85% of their registered childcare costs each month, irrespective of their hours worked. That is available to all parents who satisfy the childcare cost and the work condition to qualify for help. This is obviously a substantial increase from what existed before and it applies to any parent up to the maximum amount of £646 per month for one child and £1,108.04 per month for two or more children.

Separate from the universal credit childcare element, the Government also provide free childcare for many families. There are the 15 hours free childcare a week we brought forward for three to four-year-olds in England. In 2017, that doubled to 30 hours for working parents of three to four-year-olds. There are similar schemes available in the devolved nations. Since 2013, we have also provided 15 hours of free early education entitlement to disadvantaged two-year-olds. The obvious aim is to improve long-term educational outcomes, and narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.

Parents are eligible if they are in receipt of certain income benefits, and have a household income of less than £15,400.

Hannah Bardell *rose—*

Guy Opperman: I will pause there, although I have more on childcare, and let the hon. Lady intervene.

Hannah Bardell: Some of what the Minister describes is a very complex landscape, with which many of my constituents have significant issues. Does he share my concern that there are many billions of pounds of unclaimed benefits every year? Perhaps that is because it is such a complex system. It is difficult for people, such as single parents, who are under pressure to navigate it.

Guy Opperman: The Chancellor is looking at that matter. Clearly, any person who does not claim an entitled benefit is one person too many. We all accept that. We would definitely like to see a higher number of people taking the UC element of childcare. Support already exists, such as the flexible support fund, to assist that process.

The hon. Lady should also be aware that the whole purpose of the childcare is to assist people into employment. The published statistics show that the effect of bringing in the childcare, however imperfect she may consider it in the present situation, has definitely made a massive difference. For example, there are now 1.2 million lone parents in employment. There is clear evidence that demonstrates the importance of parental employment.

We can argue about the relative merits and improvements that have taken place over the past few years or decades. Bluntly speaking, there is the opportunity for childcare support, but that has to be married to the enhancements of existing benefits and the changes we introduced, such as the work allowance and the taper. Universal credit is designed to make work pay, so that not all a person's net earnings are deducted from their UC.

Claimants with children or a limited capability for work will also benefit from a work allowance. The work allowance is the amount of earnings a UC household can earn before the single taper rate of 55% is applied, and their universal credit begins to be reduced. That has been reduced and changed over the past two years. Together with the changing of the taper rate and the work allowance, that boosts support for single parents and all families, who are dealing with this.

Much was made by the hon. Members for East Dunbartonshire and for Strangford of the issue of child maintenance, and I will try to address those points. I always enjoy the start of the hon. Member for Strangford's speeches, because the first minute is normally a paean of praise to the individual Minister, irrespective of who that Minister is. I am always tempted to jump up and implore him to stop there, because that is the best part as far as I am concerned. My mum loves his speeches.

I accept the hon. Gentleman raised a number of key points. Child maintenance is devolved to Northern Ireland, and clearly the Department for Work and Pensions is not responsible for its delivery. In respect of child poverty in Northern Ireland, in the three years to 2019-20, 18% of children in Northern Ireland were in absolute poverty before housing costs. That is 6% less than in the three years to 2009-10. I accept that every percentage is too high, but I respectfully suggest that the statistics show things are better than they were. I take his comments on board.

To respond generally on child maintenance, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire raised a number of matters. I refer her to the three parliamentary answers

[Guy Opperman]

given by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), on 28 February, which set out in detail some of the points the hon. Lady raised. My suggestion to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, because she is clearly very exercised on that point, would be that she sits down with Lord Younger, the child maintenance Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions—I am always pleased to give other Ministers the chance to have a meeting that is not my responsibility. I strongly suggest that she sits down with the officials and the individual Minister and goes through some of those key points. If she is interested in that, then, clearly, I will organise and facilitate it and make it happen.

While I accept that there is always criticism made of the system, the system is, with respect, both doing better than it was and under a transformational procedure.

Amy Callaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Of course I will, and I am going to try to answer some of the points that she raised.

Amy Callaghan: On the point of transformational change, I wonder what the Minister would say to my constituent, Felicity, who has been struggling to get maintenance for her son over a number of years because of consistent failures in the child maintenance system.

Guy Opperman: Well, the simple point is that I strongly urge the hon. Lady to raise that with the individual Minister. I cannot comment on a particular case, as she knows, but, without any shadow of a doubt, the Department is clear that our role is to support parents who choose to use its services, encouraging them to make a family-based arrangement to start with, or supporting them with the statutory scheme if they cannot.

The Child Maintenance Service is genuinely delivering a transformation programme and aiming to improve outcomes for children by enabling parents to set up, and then manage, their child maintenance arrangements in ways that suit their own individual circumstances. Significant improvements have been made to the online offerings, whether around applying for child maintenance or the development of a new service to help in arranging child maintenance. All of that makes for a more accessible service.

Let me give a few examples. In the quarter ending September 2022, 872,000 children were covered by Child Maintenance Service arrangements—an increase of 25,700. Our current estimate is that, as a result of regular child maintenance payments, 140,000 fewer children are growing up in poverty. Clearly, these matters are always difficult, always contentious, and always a difficulty between individual parents. We accept entirely that the principle is that child maintenance is designed to encourage parents to work together and make their own family-based child maintenance arrangements wherever possible, which is usually better for the children, but it can play a role in helping to lift children out of poverty and can help to enhance the outcomes of individual children.

I will turn back to some of the other points that I wished to make. Clearly, as a result of some of the decisions made in September, the child benefit itself—which is payable to anyone responsible for bringing up a child

up to age 16, or under 20 if they are in approved education or training—will increase by 10.1% from April 2023 for the eldest or only child, and there will also be an increase for every other child. Alongside the financial assistance that child benefit provides, claimants also receive national insurance credits to protect their future entitlement to pension entitlements. Those can be transferred to grandparents providing childcare.

I will touch on a couple of quick points that were raised on other matters. There were multiple references to the Chancellor. On flexible working, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), is obviously bringing forward legislation on that point.

There have been great changes there, and I can assure colleagues that the Department for Work and Pensions, as with other Departments, operates a very flexible working arrangement. It is not necessarily based in Whitehall, I can assure them. For example, I have two ladies who job share one of the most senior roles in Government in the Department for Work and Pensions. Between them, they cover one directorship in one of the most impressive job share and flexible-working examples I can imagine. Frankly, that is becoming the norm on a greater and greater basis.

I will conclude by stating that I accept and endorse the approach of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire on how we are driving these matters forwards. I accept that more can be done on the Child Maintenance Service, and I encourage her to take up my offer of a meeting, on behalf of my parliamentary colleague. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to set out certain matters in detail, including the amount of support that is available to single-parent families. Clearly, I will report back to the Chancellor the last-minute additions to the Budget that many have put forwards.

We are committed to meeting the needs of individuals and single-parent families in the United Kingdom, and we continue to provide the Scottish and Northern Irish Governments with generous funding and support where these matters are devolved.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister, for the revelation about Jane Bond. I hope that Thames House was not listening.

3.40 pm

Amy Callaghan: We have heard a lot today about support—or, indeed, the lack of support—for single-parent families. I thank colleagues from across the House for joining me in calling on this Tory Government to do so much more to support single-parent families.

Single parents should be praised, and we have heard personal examples from my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on the Labour Front Bench. I will add the example of my nanna, Bea, who raised my mum and my aunt Pauline in a single-parent house. She had to work so damn hard to provide for them. All these decades later, we should have got to a much better place, where single-parent families actually feel supported.

I will pick up on some of the points made by the Minister. He wasted some time pondering independence and the SNP leadership contest, suggesting that he did

not want to stand up and defend the Government's record on support for single-parent families. On his point about child maintenance, I will certainly take him up on the offer to facilitate a meeting on my constituent Felicity's ongoing situation, and more broadly on CMS in general.

The Minister glossed over some of the decisions made in September. Some recognition from him that this Government are responsible for inflation being where it is would have been appreciated, but to see the Government actually doing something to tackle the cost of living crisis for families would be even better still.

I thank Members from across the House for their contributions, and I hope the Minister takes away some of the points we have raised and actually delivers for single-parent families.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for single parent families.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Middlesbrough Development Corporation

4 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I will call Andy McDonald to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up; that is the convention for 30-minute debates, as he will no doubt be aware.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the Middlesbrough Development Corporation.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley.

On Friday 24 February, Middlesbrough Council held an extraordinary general meeting, convened by the monitoring officer, to determine whether the council supported the proposal to create a Middlesbrough development corporation. The proposal was put to the vote, and 13 councillors voted to approve and 17 voted against. Many councillors from the ruling Tory-independent coalition did not attend, although they were all given proper notice of the meeting. Obviously, not all councillors can be expected to turn up for every single meeting and there will be good reasons for some absences, but, quite frankly, the appallingly low turnout for such an important vote was pathetic.

The council decided not to approve the MDC, but three days after the council had made that decision, 25 councillors, led by the elected Mayor, Andy Preston, wrote to the Government saying that the council decision should be ignored and the Minister should instead accept their letter of acquiescence as being the true position of the council. I do not need to stress just how ridiculous it is that the Government, in their determination to overreach local democracy, are prepared to ignore the formal council decision.

Indeed, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has subsequently written a letter in which he outrageously describes the vote of the local authority as being born of "misinformation and mischief making". That is incredibly partisan language from the Secretary of State, but perhaps we should not be surprised.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that this sets a precedent for Tory Mayors or Tory Governments to ride roughshod over local democracy and local decision making in our local authorities? There could be more land grabs elsewhere in the Tees Valley, such as in Darlington and in Stockton.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes a very valid point. That is one of the facets of the debate that I have sought today; I want to stress that that is a danger.

We all want to see good development in our towns, but how that development is done is important. Over the years, Middlesbrough Council has acquired and assembled assets using public money, and it holds those assets on behalf of all of us in Middlesbrough. The proposal is that if the council transfers these assets to the MDC, the MDC will, in turn, use money from central Government for development. Councillors were not elected to give our town away, but we now know that money is available. The bargain proposed is that if—and only if—the council gives up those assets and planning powers to the MDC, £18 million will be released for development.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way, and I am conscious that he has given me his consent to speak momentarily. Does he recognise that the planning powers and funding have been made available precisely because the Government have confidence that the development corporation will be a vehicle for regeneration and renewal of a sort that Middlesbrough Council has, I am afraid, sadly not proved capable of offering for too many years?

Andy McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I do not share his confidence, and I will set out the reasons why the structure that has been set out is incredibly dangerous. I share his observations about how Middlesbrough Council has been run of late. I will come back to that, but perhaps it is shared territory for us.

Critically, however, the council will have no say on how any development goes ahead or how decisions are made. That is more akin to a protection racket than to good government. Those decisions about development will be made not by the council, but by an unelected board appointed by Ben Houchen, the Conservative Tees Valley Mayor. He will decide who goes on the board, not the people of Middlesbrough or its elected council.

Much is said about devolution, whereby power and resources should be pushed down and be in the gift of the most local possible form of democratic representation. Here, the opposite is being proposed. This is not devolution; it is gangster politics, taking power and control away from the people, while the elected independent Mayor of Middlesbrough and his Tory deputy will be on the board. It seems—

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: Let me finish the point. It seems that they will be there in a personal capacity, whether they remain in office or not; it is not clear. The Mayor of Middlesbrough, Andy Preston, did not attend the vote by which this decision was made. He was advised by the council's monitoring officer that he could not attend because of his own personal pecuniary interests.

Jill Mortimer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way now that he has made his point?

Andy McDonald: I am only halfway through, but—

Jill Mortimer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I want to correct what he has just stated. He has described this as gangster politics. In actual fact, those places on the board will belong to whoever is democratically elected as Mayor and deputy Mayor. If a Labour Mayor and deputy Mayor are democratically elected come May, they will take those places on the board.

Andy McDonald: Let us deal with all the rest of them; I am just about to do that very thing.

I was talking about a conflict of interest that the Mayor of Middlesbrough now has. The geographical boundary of the MDC takes in an area called Middlehaven and vast swathes of the town centre, and it includes an area of the town where Mr Preston owns or has owned property. According to the latest Tees Valley Combined

Authority register of members' interests, Mr Preston owns vast swathes of land and properties on both banks of the River Tees—well over 50 properties in total. Clearly, the decisions that the MDC board makes could have a direct bearing on any increase in value of any such interests, and they could potentially directly and financially benefit him.

In local government and in all public institutions, the greatest of care has to be taken regarding such potentially conflicting pecuniary interests. That is why Mr Preston was advised not to attend a vote at the crucial meeting. There is an obvious conflict of interest, and the question arises: if he cannot vote on the creation of such a corporation, how can he possibly lead on a letter to countermand that very vote and then serve on the board? It is utterly farcical; it is almost as though we have gone back to living in medieval times, with wealthy feudal landlords controlling political power over their lowly subjects without any proper democratic processes of accountability.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend clearly shares my concerns about how development corporations are being managed on Teesside, with joint ventures being created and then used as vehicles to transfer hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of public assets to private companies, and all behind doors and in secret. Does he fear, as I do, that the new Middlesbrough and Hartlepool development corporations could see more of the same—deals made in private to transfer public assets to private companies?

Jill Mortimer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No, I am afraid that that is not how it works; I respond to interventions.

Jill Mortimer: I wanted to intervene on the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) because he mentioned my constituency.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough has the floor, and he will speak and not be interrupted. If he wishes to give way, he will indicate that he will give way.

Andy McDonald: Thank you, Mr Paisley.

Other people have been proposed to serve on this board as well. They include Paul Booth—a former executive of SABIC, the Saudi Arabian petrochemical company—who will be chair. I have known Paul for years. Although he is not a resident of Middlesbrough, he undoubtedly has well-intentioned views about what he thinks is in Middlesbrough's best interests—but no one has elected him.

Other non-elected appointees include the chief constable of Cleveland, who does not even live in the Cleveland police force area, let alone in Middlesbrough. He is, of course, a senior police officer, but I am not sure what experience he has of urban regeneration. His best contribution to our town would, in my view, be to do his job and make our streets safe for residents and businesses.

Similarly, another board member will be the Conservative police and crime commissioner for Cleveland, Steve Turner—a man who, let us not forget, received a caution from Cleveland police for theft from his employer.

Again, he does not reside in Middlesbrough, I am not aware that he has any urban regeneration experience or expertise, and that is not his job.

I have significant concerns about the basis on which the Tees Valley Mayor, Mr Houchen, will select board members. He will have the power to appoint and dismiss them, much as we have seen him do at the South Tees development corporation. That has been evidenced in a raft of investigative articles by *Private Eye*, which he dismissed as a comic book. *Private Eye* has unearthed, in great detail, squalid and questionable dealings at the South Tees development corporation, and it has exposed the squandering and misuse of hundreds of millions of pounds of public money. That money was primarily deployed to make the private joint venture partners even wealthier beyond imagining. In respect of that, there will one day be a reckoning.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I refer back to the point that the hon. Gentleman made about the involvement of the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable. We in Tees Valley understand the challenges and difficulties that antisocial behaviour brings to the regeneration of a town. The hon. Gentleman has significant antisocial behaviour issues in his constituency and, in my view, the involvement of the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable on the board is really important.

Just last week in Darlington, Labour councillors voted against planning permission for investment in Teesside International airport. What is it about the Labour party in Teesside that means it has to oppose and stop every investment?

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order.

Andy McDonald: On the point the hon. Gentleman made about Darlington, the Labour party often gets the charge that it is somehow anti-growth. That is utter tosh. It is the most pathetic jibe, and Conservative Members would be better served by engaging in intelligent debate.

On his original point, if the hon. Gentleman genuinely wants to talk about crime, disorder and public order on our streets, I suggest that that is what the police should be doing. I do not expect them to be serving on regeneration boards. They should get out, do their job and ensure they have people on our streets looking after our businesses and making sure people are safe. Serving on regeneration boards is not their function, and they should get on and do the job they were put there to do.

There are lots of questions emerging about how the South Tees development corporation and others have operated. My clear preference would be for the much-needed urban regeneration in central Middlesbrough to sit with the elected council. In turn, the council can rely on its internal officer expertise, and, where necessary, external expertise from established professional organisations with track records of successful urban regeneration. Dealing with regeneration in that way ought ordinarily to ensure accountability and transparency.

Although I share the concerns expressed by the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) about how duties have been discharged by the current political leadership of Middlesbrough Council, which runs until May of this year, I fear that the likelihood of there being proper scrutiny and accountability

of the proposed MDC is very low. Yet again on Teesside, a board made up of hand-picked individuals will be making important decisions about how valuable public funds are used without any meaningful accountability or scrutiny. Indeed, the MDC will acquire planning powers that currently—and rightly—belong to the council, which will now lose valuable fee income and business rates. That will inevitably place more pressure on the council, which could lead to further cuts.

Mr Simon Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No; the right hon. Gentleman will get his say. He asked me if he could participate in the debate, and I said yes. I will not give way any further, because I want to give him the opportunity to make his contribution.

Those pressures could lead to further cuts in Middlesbrough. We could be walking into yet another public-private joint venture that will end up transferring assets out of the domain of the MDC and into private hands, as per the recent shenanigans at the South Tees development corporation.

Of course I want investment in Middlesbrough. After 13 years of this Government, almost half the children in our town live in poverty. The town mayor and the executive have just voted through a budget that will turn off the street lights, reduce our libraries and seriously deplete our warden service. I see economic growth and development as one of the key levers to turn that around. In addition, we need a more equitable settlement from central Government, but that is a debate for another day.

We have done some great work in Middlesbrough, despite difficult economic times. Here are some examples of the significant successes. TeesAMP, next to Newport bridge, is a state-of-the-art advanced manufacturing park. It hosts many high-quality businesses at the cutting edge of their respective industries, providing high-quality, high-wage jobs. Boho Digital City is a great success story, with over a decade of starting up and sustaining digital businesses. Centre Square in Middlesbrough brings in the likes of GB Bank and AXA UK, to name but two. The historic quarter around Exchange Square works with Historic England, which has funded some wonderful work. The regeneration and redevelopment of our railway station—a subject very dear to my heart—brings better connections and opportunities for the much-needed economic growth of our town.

All those achievements were begun under previous administrations. The clear evidence is that we already have the systems in place to make this work and to enable Middlesbrough to attract investment. It makes little sense, in my mind, to create another layer of bureaucracy. All those achievements were made by people working together through the various democratic institutions. In particular, they were often in partnership and co-operation with the Tees Valley Combined Authority—from when it was set up before Mr Houchen was elected by what were then five Labour councils across the Tees valley, and continuing subsequent to his election.

There is no reason to suppose that those sorts of arrangements could not work again. We should deploy funds in a way that works, and that holds in our institutions of local democracy. All too often, the rules on good governance, integrity and sound money are

[Andy McDonald]

undermined, with democratic and accountable control taken away from the people and given to chosen individuals to enable them to use vast quantities of public money as they see fit. I fully anticipate that the Government will plough on regardless, but they need to know that the MDC, despite the absence of transparency and democratic integrity within its structure and architecture, will be held to account by the people of Middlesbrough for its decisions. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): In line with protocol, Mr Simon Clarke sought permission from the mover of the motion and myself to make a short speech. I will give you about four minutes to make that speech, Mr Clarke. The Minister is being very flexible with you as well.

4.19 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Thank you, Mr Paisley; that is very kind. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for giving me his consent to speak.

To be in politics is to choose, and I choose progress. I want to put on record why the Middlesbrough Development Corporation is so important. It will turn around those parts of Middlesbrough where decay and decline have unfortunately set in deep for many decades. We need the MDC to deliver a strategic vision and accelerated planning powers that will unlock the growth and reform that we all want. Crucially, it will enable not only Government investment but hopefully private sector investment, which will transform areas such as Gresham and Middlehaven. The Labour party in Hartlepool knows that is a model that will work for the town, and so voted for it just last month; every independent and Conservative councillor in Middlesbrough knows it is right for our town, and has expressed that view. They are joined in that by independent, third-party organisations, such as Teesside University.

The Labour party in Middlesbrough alone opposes these plans. Its reasons against them are, I am afraid, sophistry. The Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, has given the commitment that the council will be no worse off financially for giving away the assets concerned. There is no democratic deficit; as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) has said, if the town's mayor and deputy mayor were Labour councillors, they would sit on the board if they were to win the election in May. A majority of the councillors in the town have written to the Secretary of State supporting the plans.

Notwithstanding the innuendo we have heard, there will be no asset stripping; there are very few assets in Gresham and Middlehaven to be stripped, sadly. These are areas that need help, support, investment and regeneration, and that is what we will give them. Labour tried to close our airport; Labour tried to close our freeport; Labour tried to stop the Treasury opening in Darlington; Labour tried to stop the Brexit that Teesside voted for by two to one; and now it is trying to stop desperately needed regeneration in Middlesbrough. It is unacceptable, and it needs to be called out today.

For the first time in my lifetime, good things are happening in our town. A steady stream of important new developments is ensuring that the future of the town is brighter than it has been for decades. Tomorrow's

Budget will hopefully bring further good news in the form of an investment zone—a pro-growth zone of the kind that I was proud to work on while a Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and which our Mayor, Ben Houchen, has been so helpful in developing the proposition for.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the strong support he has provided in ensuring that the MDC will go ahead, despite the best efforts of Labour to wreck the proposition. I am equally grateful for the tireless work of our Mayor, Ben Houchen, and my Conservative colleagues in the Tees Valley, as well as all those people in Middlesbrough who have contacted me to express their disappointment and outrage at the actions of the Labour party—the wreckers, the enemies of progress, and the enemies of investment.

As I said at the outset, to be in politics is to take a side. Labour has once again sided against investment, progress and Middlesbrough's best interests, and today we expose that sorry legacy. I urge everyone in our town to reflect closely, before the pivotal elections on 4 May, on what is truly in their best interests, and who is truly on their side.

4.22 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a real pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of the Department and the Government. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for securing this important debate, which I know will be of great interest to residents of Middlesbrough who are watching and thinking about how to vote in the local elections.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for setting out so superlatively Labour's anti-growth and anti-opportunity position. He was ably supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer), and for Darlington (Peter Gibson). I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's position and to respond directly to the points made by, and the allegations, misinformation and innuendo from, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough.

The hon. Gentleman will know that between 23 June and 4 August last year, the Mayor of the Tees Valley Combined Authority carried out a public consultation on a proposal to designate a mayoral development area for Middlesbrough town centre. As part of that, a development corporation would be established, to be known as the Middlesbrough development corporation. Middlesbrough Council responded positively to the consultation, so there is no way that any kind of democratic deficit can be claimed.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Our Labour-led council lobbied against even any discussion of a mayoral development corporation for Stockton, despite the millions that it could bring in investment; it put petty party politics ahead of the interests of local people. Will my hon. Friend confirm that if the election changes the leadership of the local council, the Department will be willing to get round the table with me, the Mayor and the new council leadership to look at what opportunities we can bring to Stockton?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend. The Government will always stand squarely behind local areas that are doing everything they can to level up. That is the basis on which this Government were elected.

Following the consultation in October, the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen—who, I remind the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, was democratically elected—wrote to inform the Secretary of State that he was designating an area of land in Middlesbrough as an MDC. It is important to stress that the designation was submitted following unanimous agreement by the combined authority's cabinet, of which the Mayor of Middlesbrough Council is a member.

It is completely right that we give these Mayors the tools and resources they need to succeed. Obviously, a Mayor cannot unilaterally create one of these corporations; public consultation is required, and that took place in this case. The consent of the members of the combined authority is needed, and the process allows Parliament to have its say. There is a clear, transparent, democratic process, and it has been followed in the establishment of this corporation. The conspiracy construction that the hon. Gentleman is putting on these events is nothing more than a last-ditch attempt to stand in the way of life chances and opportunities for the people he represents. I am proud to be on the other side of the debate, and will do absolutely everything I can, along with my hon. Friends, to level up areas that so desperately need it, as he has said.

Alex Cunningham: Can the Minister guarantee that none of the assets transferred to the Middlesbrough development corporation will end up in private hands, perhaps through a joint venture? Will the same people who have benefited from other developments in the area benefit yet again?

Rachel Maclean: There is growing consensus across the House that in the past, too many decisions about local areas have been made by politicians here in Whitehall. It is not for me to stand in the way of the best interests of the democratically elected Middlesbrough Council and the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen, who is promoting the best interests of local people in seeking to regenerate the area. The obvious way to ensure levelling up is through devolution, and that involves putting power, money and control in the hands of those powerful, democratically accountable local leaders.

Jill Mortimer: I hear a lot of chuntering from Opposition Members about things not being democratic. For 57 years, Hartlepool was ignored by the Labour party. I campaigned

and won a by-election not two years ago on a positive campaign about positive change, not on the hate and spite spun by Labour. It has not yet been two years, but we have already seen massive improvements and investment in my constituency. It received £25 million from the towns fund deal and £16.5 million from the levelling-up fund. Many more millions are now coming from the Mayor, Ben Houchen, for our town. People are seeing positive change and a difference, and it is time we all started talking up Teesside.

Rachel Maclean: I have nothing but huge admiration for my hon. Friend. She put her case so well. The Government are squarely backing democratically elected local Mayors. I remind the hon. Member for Middlesbrough of how much power and accountability we have given effective Mayors from all parties, including the Labour Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham; the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street; and the Labour Mayor of Liverpool, Steve Rotheram.

It is important to stress that the Secretary of State is required by law to establish any development corporation requested by the Mayor for a development area and give it the title as requested—in this case, the Middlesbrough development corporation. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough has tried to make out that a land grab is under way, but I have set out very clearly that proper process has been followed.

We want the planned multimillion-pound investment in Middlesbrough, spearheaded by that corporation, to go ahead. It will bring big improvements to culture and education, including through the expansion of the Northern School of Art, and improvements to local transport through the development of Middlesbrough train station.

The Middlesbrough development corporation is just the next chapter in the town's levelling-up story. It is proudly backed by the Conservative Mayor, Ben Houchen, and my Conservative colleagues representing Teesside. Long may that continue. This economic resurgence is being led, in no small part, by the leadership of Tees Valley Combined Authority. I stand squarely against the allegations that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough has made, and I will continue to work night and day to level up Middlesbrough and Teesside.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you for the feisty debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Cancer Care

4.30 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of cancer care.

Cancer will affect every single one of us here today, and every single person in this country, in some way. Statistically, half of us will get cancer in our lifetime. When that happens, both we and our families should expect the best possible care and support from our health service. This time last year, my family and I were coming to terms with losing my mum to secondary breast cancer that spread to her liver. She passed away in April 2022, only six years after her younger sister passed away with the same diagnosis. Their brother, my uncle, has since bravely fought cancer too, and I am pleased to say—not least because he tells the worst dad jokes known to man—that he is doing well.

My family know all too well what the statistics mean in real life. I would like to think that I am one of the few to have lost their mother at a young age, but that is not true. A member of my team, Bradley, reminded me that his mother, Sharon Langer, would have been 58 today. She died in December 2018 from lung cancer.

Thanks to our health and care services, we have taken great strides in improving cancer survival rates. Over the last 40 years, the survival rate has doubled in this country, and now half of the people diagnosed with cancer in England and Wales survive their disease for 10 years or more. However, the number of cancer cases will only rise in the years ahead. Modelling by Cancer Research UK suggests that cases will rise by around a third, with as many as 506,000 people being diagnosed with cancer between in 2038 and 2040. That is not wholly because of a growing and ageing population, as incidence rates are also due to rise, meaning that individuals will be more likely to be diagnosed with cancer than they are now.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My condolences to the hon. Lady on the loss of her mum, which must have been horrendous. One of my constituents, Jo Taylor, has received an advanced breast cancer diagnosis; hon. Members may have seen her on social media. She is campaigning to make sure that secondary breast cancer, as it is also known, is counted, because currently we only estimate the number of women—and men—with secondary breast cancer. We know that figures drive care. Does the hon. Lady think that that is something the Government will take on board?

Nicola Richards: I totally agree. Any statistics and data that we can gather will help us to improve services and understand the landscape when it comes to who is affected and when cancer can recur, and it is important that we take all that into account. It is important to have a long-term plan for making our cancer services fit for what is to come. They need to cope with the increased demand, and deliver the world-leading outcomes that patients deserve.

Last year, the Government declared war on cancer. They announced a 10-year plan to ramp up our cancer services and make them the world leader that they ought to be. However, we now know that our plans for cancer care will become part of the five-year major

conditions strategy. Although it is clearly important to take a holistic approach to caring for people with life-threatening diseases, there is no killer like cancer. We must ensure that our strategy addresses the key elements of what would be a world-leading cancer care system: research, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. I will first discuss one of the most important elements that we need addressed in the strategy: diagnosis.

Finding cancer early and commencing treatment is key to survival rates. For instance, 90% of people diagnosed at the earliest stage of bowel cancer will survive for five years or more, compared with just 10% of those diagnosed at the latest stage. Furthermore, almost everyone diagnosed with breast cancer at the earliest stage can receive treatment and live for five years or more, whereas only three in 10 women diagnosed at the latest stage survive for more than five years. The picture also varies by region. Unfortunately, if someone lives in the west midlands, they are statistically less likely to survive for five years or more after being diagnosed with lung cancer than those across England on average, and all combined mortality rates are significantly higher than average, too. Those stark figures hammer home the need to make sure that we detect cancer and commence treatment at the earliest opportunity.

I welcome the commitment from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that the strategy will shift our model towards the early detection and treatment of diseases. I also welcome the ambitious target set to diagnose 75% of cancers early by 2028. I look forward to reviewing how the strategy will address the need for greater capacity in the breast screening programme, ensure that all women at elevated risk of breast cancer are included in the national breast screening programme, and raise the proportion of all cancers that are diagnosed early; at present, just under 60% are.

Of course, it is not enough to detect cancer in its earliest stage. We also have to make sure that people receive treatment promptly, especially after urgent referrals. Much work still needs to be done in that area. Only 54.5% of people starting their treatment after an urgent referral do so within the 62-day target, and around 2,100 people have waited more than 104 days to begin their treatment. In my constituency of West Bromwich East and the wider Sandwell area, there is a mixed picture when it comes to meeting those important targets. It is welcome that our local health service met the two-week target for referring urgent suspected cancer cases to a specialist. However, like much of the rest of the country, other targets, including the 62-day standard, were not met. When I compare those statistics with the survival rates that I mentioned, it is obvious that we have to do more to ensure that people start treatment as early as possible. A critical element of that is ensuring that cancer services are sufficiently well staffed.

It would be remiss of me not to honour the people who work day in, day out, providing care for cancer patients across the country. We have all relied on them to care for us and our loved ones, in sometimes the most desperate circumstances, and to provide comfort for us in our time of need. I put on the record my thanks to the Mary Stevens Hospice in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb); it looked after my mum in her last days, and held a last-minute wedding blessing for me and my now husband at my mum's request.

We need to address the shortfalls in the workforce that are affecting our success in improving cancer outcomes. We have a shortfall of both clinical oncologists and radiologists, who are vital to the effort to diagnose and treat cancer patients in the earliest stages. It is so important to tackle the workforce issues with long-term plans to recruit and train the staff we need to tackle cancer properly. I welcome the Government's NHS long-term workforce plan, which commits to addressing those and many other issues across the NHS workforce. I ask the Government to ensure that the necessary funding is provided to meet those commitments.

On the major conditions strategy, I hope that the Government will take into account the wealth of views expressed by Cancer Research UK and other key organisations in the cancer community in last year's call for evidence, and ensure that the strategy lays the groundwork for a longer-term strategy on cancer that also tackles inequalities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Four in 10 cancers across the UK are preventable. We all know that. Action to prevent cancers will save lives. Northern Ireland—this is not the responsibility of the Minister, by the way—has no smoke-free target. We need a strategy to stop people smoking, to encourage young people not to start smoking, and to fund research and support programmes. Does the hon. Lady agree that we must have a UK-wide smoke-free target? Despite health being a devolved issue, we have to be on the same page to create a national target to prevent some of the deadliest cancers that so many people suffer from and lose their lives to. She is very much committed to that, as am I.

Nicola Richards: I completely agree. It is important that we do wider work around prevention, so that when someone who has a history of cancer in their family presents themselves to the NHS, they are taken seriously and their health is evaluated at the earliest stage. That could save the NHS a lot of money and the individual and their family a lot of pain and suffering.

In my constituency of West Bromwich East and the wider Sandwell area, we have worse health outcomes than other areas of the country, as I mentioned. Combined mortality rates for all cancers are higher in the west midlands than the English average. That situation must improve. We have a fantastic opportunity to level up healthcare in our area through the new Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, which will open to my constituents in West Bromwich in the coming year. It is one of a number of new hospitals that this Government are delivering to help level up healthcare. It is vital that we properly equip new and existing hospitals, so that we can tackle waiting times and improve outcomes for patients.

One of the more high-tech solutions, of which we need to see more, is radiotherapy. I recently attended an event in Parliament hosted by Radiotherapy UK and learned more about this form of treatment, which is known to be extremely cost-effective and less invasive. It costs around £3,000 to £7,000 to cure a cancer patient using radiotherapy. West Bromwich Albion legend, Bryan Robson, also attended the event in support of radiotherapy, and I had the opportunity to have a brief chat with him to discuss how the treatment saved his life. During the event, I signed the declaration asking for more action to tackle waiting times and in support of radiotherapy.

The major conditions strategy is an opportunity to refocus on this type of treatment and to ensure that it receives the necessary investment, so that many more people around the country have the option of radiotherapy to treat their cancer. Although having world-leading facilities is vital, they must be backed up with the world-leading strategy we need, and staffed with the people who provide the excellent levels of care that we know our workforce can provide when they are given the right tools. I therefore welcome the Government's plans to ensure that we tackle the health inequalities between our regions, and I look forward to hearing more about what that means for cancer patients across the country.

I welcome the positive steps that we have already taken to improve cancer care in this country. Evidence suggests that countries with the best cancer outcomes are those that adopt long-term cancer-specific strategies. I therefore hope that the major conditions strategy will commit to improving outcomes for cancer patients and their families, as well as paving the way for a long-term strategy on cancer care that will make our services the best in the world.

4.41 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber under your stewardship, Mr Paisley. I offer my condolences to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards). Cancer is a dreadful disease that needs to be tackled in the most empathetic yet robust way.

There is no question that cancer care is in crisis. We have heard the figures relating to NHS waiting lists generally. Given that 7 million people are waiting for treatment, that equates to about 13,000 people waiting for care in my constituency alone, many of whom will, without doubt, be waiting for cancer-related care. One of my constituents wrote to me—I will not mention her name—exhorting me to come to the debate, because she said that she was deeply concerned about the latest waiting times for cancer treatment. They show that in England, in January, nearly one in two cancer patients missed life-saving treatment targets. That brings us to the crux of the issue: what are we going to do about that? What do the Government intend to do about that? Notwithstanding what they are trying to do, frankly I am not sure that that is sufficiently robust to take us forward.

We are replete with statistics from organisations such as the Royal College of Radiologists, which states that the best way to improve cancer survival rates is by diagnosing and treating patients earlier and more rapidly, as the hon. Lady said, and by ensuring that there are enough radiologists and oncologists to provide cancer care today. That is essential, but there is a shortfall across those areas. Having determined that that is a crucial part of the pathway to diagnosing or treating cancer patients, we find that the shortfall in the number of clinical radiology consultants is 30%, or 1,453 people, and the shortfall in the number of clinical oncology consultants is 17%, or 163 people, which is predicted to rise to 26%, or 317, by 2026. The reality is that the line is going down. Meanwhile, demand is increasing. By 2035, it is estimated that more than half a million people a year will be diagnosed with cancer in the UK, an increase of 40% since 2015. That is why we have to tackle this situation.

As the hon. Lady said, without sufficient investment, chronic workforce shortages will continue to be an issue and will limit the capacity and capability for innovation.

[Peter Dowd]

I hope that the Government's long-term workforce plan will move us along. However, it was like dragging a screaming child to get the Government to agree to a long-term plan. We do not know when that will come out—I hope that it will appear pretty soon, but I am not sure. We need that plan as soon as practicable.

For the first time in the history of the NHS, nearly half of all cancer patients fail to receive treatment within two months of an urgent referral. That figure comes from January 2023. It is damning but, more importantly, for the individual patients concerned, the situation is life-threatening. I am not sure that the Government have quite grasped that fact. To do so, they would have to realise the seriousness and challenges they face and I am genuinely not sure that they have grasped the seriousness.

The same is true for bowel cancer. Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the UK and the second biggest cancer killer. It kills more than 16,500 people a year. A targeted long-term plan for cancer is the best way to improve outcomes for those patients. The Government have to commit, as has been requested, to an ambitious, fully funded, dedicated plan for cancer, which addresses current issues in cancer care and equips services to meet future demand. Yet more organisations are, in effect, asking the Government to pull their finger out.

The organisations that I mentioned are external to Parliament, but Parliament's Public Accounts Committee also said, in relation to the management of NHS backlogs and waiting times in England:

“Cancer waiting times are at their worst recorded level and NHS England will not meet its first cancer recovery target.”

It stated that, in August 2022,

“there were 2,600 patients who had been waiting more than two years.”

Let me repeat that: 2,600 patients had been waiting more than two years. A record 7 million people, of course, are on the waiting list. The Committee also said that NHS England—and the Government are as guilty on this point—

“made unrealistic assumptions about the first year of recovery, including that there would be low levels of COVID-19...The NHS is still not planning properly for the staffing and other resources it needs to deliver additional diagnostic and treatment capacity.”

I could go on—I will not—but I hope that those points give a flavour of the crisis that the NHS tends to be in, generally, and that particular services are in, whether that is radiology, dentistry or pharmacy. Frankly, the list goes on and on, and that means that our constituents are not getting the care they need.

I hope the Minister has read the documents from all the organisations that I have mentioned, as well as those from a plethora of other health and health service organisations. I hope she has read all the submissions because it seems to me that, to use a hackneyed old phrase, we are getting warm words. No doubt the Minister will tell us what the Government are doing, have been doing, might do and are planning to do. The reality is, however, that the situation is not moving along and, in the meantime, patients are suffering, families are suffering, and patients are dying. Let us not beat about the bush; that is the reality.

I exhort the Minister to look at all the documents and evidence she wants and to consider it as much as she can, but the Government have to accept, realise and recognise that there is a crisis in cancer care for which they—along with all the professionals and organisations in the NHS; I completely accept that—are primarily responsible. They are the ones responsible for the funding and organisation. I hope the Minister bears that in mind during these deliberations.

4.50 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance today, Mr Paisley, and to follow the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who made some important points, for which I thank him. I express massive congratulations to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) not just on securing an important debate, but on making an excellent speech. I commiserate, console and offer my condolences to her on the loss of her mother. I also lost my mum to cancer. The hon. Lady is a bit younger than I am, so I assume we lost our mums at about the same age.

My mum, Dr Susan Farron—she would like me to mention her title, I am sure—passed away from ovarian cancer 19 years ago. Although we are here to represent our constituents and do what is right, whether we are personally affected or not, there is an element of honouring our mothers in what we seek to do today. I am sure the hon. Lady's mother would be massively proud of her, not just for what she has done today.

This is a huge issue. It is said that half of us will get cancer at some point in our lives, and 100% will be affected by it in one way or another. We deal at the moment with terrifying waiting times for cancer treatment. They are not quite as awful as they were a month or so ago. The Minister may say that, and we will grab some positives where they exist, but they are still deeply troubling.

In my constituency, in south Cumbria, 27% of people with cancer are not being seen within two months of being diagnosed. Someone who has cancer and has been told they have this dangerous thing within them that is potentially going to kill them then waits for two months for treatment. In north Cumbria, 44% of people diagnosed with cancer are waiting more than two months for their first intervention. What terror does that spark in an individual with cancer and all their loved ones? What frustration does that lead to within the clinical community, who desperately want to care for those people? To add substance to that terror, we know that on average—although there is no average cancer—for every four weeks that treatment is delayed, there is a 10% reduction in life expectancy. That is disastrous and massively worrying for everybody who faces that challenge.

Covid has played a part, with its massive impact on our health service. People perhaps did not come forward with symptoms during the pandemic as soon as they might have done. I have many disagreements with the Government about how they handled the pandemic, but it is important to say that, if they had not locked down, the situation would have been far, far worse. Let us remember that many of the pressures that we face are because we sought to protect the NHS to save lives, and we did just that. However, the waiting times are unacceptable. They are explicable but not excusable.

I want to focus my remarks on radiotherapy. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy. One reason for doing that is that I recognise that radiotherapy is one of an important range of tools that can be used to treat, and often cure, that terrible disease of cancer. Across the world, in countries with similar levels of GDP to ours, such as other European countries, Australia and New Zealand, there is an average international target that 53% of patients living with cancer should receive radiotherapy. In the UK, the proportion is 27%. One reason is the lack of investment from Governments of all colours represented in this room. I will point the finger at this Government for not taking the action they need to now, but I could point the finger inwards at the coalition Government and the Labour Government. We have collectively neglected this situation, I am afraid.

Only 27% of people with cancer who should or could receive radiotherapy are getting it. For a clue as to why that is the case, let us look at Australia, where the five-year survival rates for lung cancer are a third better than those in the UK. Australia spends around 10% or 11% of its cancer budget on radiotherapy; in the UK, we spend just 5%.

Peter Dowd: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman raised that. Radiotherapy UK provided some figures indicating that

“by the end of 2024 there will be 74 out of date machines in the NHS,”

and that

“by 2025 it will be 90.”

Does he agree that that is a pretty grim statistic?

Tim Farron: It is, and in a moment, I will come on to how we might tackle that. It is a real problem, and not all of it is down to money—some of it is down to where and how the money is spent.

The all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy has been working with the charity Radiotherapy UK, which the hon. Gentleman rightly referred to. We have been delighted with the coverage that we have received recently through the *Daily Express*, which has run a campaign alongside us calling for a £1 billion boost in radiotherapy. The Minister can read all about it not just in the *Express*, but in the manifesto put together by the all-party group, which details that.

To put it bluntly, in the run-up to the Budget this week, we know that the Chancellor has something like £30 billion more to spend than he thought because of underspend on energy support and an increase in tax revenues, not least because of people spending more money on goods due to inflation, and therefore spending more VAT. The Government therefore have that windfall to play with. I am asking for one thirtieth of that to be spent on radiotherapy, so that we can save thousands and thousands of lives.

What would we spend that money on? We would spend it on new kit. Not all of that would need to be new money; it could just be money that is spent more wisely. As the hon. Member for Bootle alluded to, part of the problem is that we have ancient kit. He mentioned the 74 machines—linear accelerators—that will be out of date by the end of next year. Why do we have so many out-of-date linear accelerators and other bits of radiotherapy kit? It is largely because the funding for those machines is feast and famine, and because it is

devolved to 42 different specialist commissioners, when we actually need a central, national, well-funded rolling programme to replace and update linear accelerators. It is not rocket science—though it is science—and the Government could do that without spending an absolute fortune.

I want to ask the Minister again about the issue regarding tariffs. Many of our cancer centres are using second-division kit, to put it crudely. The tariff for using a second-division piece of kit means that centres can be paid for the 30 fractions a person might need to deal with their cancer, whereas with a first-division piece of kit, it might take only four, five or six trips to treat someone. Centres are paid per fraction, so there are perverse incentives whereby trusts are more likely to be rewarded if they use poorer kit more often than better kit less often. That has been fixed in part, but not for every cancer, not for every machine and not for every unit. That needs to be dealt with, and again, it could be done freely.

We talked about the workforce. The radiotherapy workforce is really small—about 6,400 individuals. There are 30% fewer entrants coming into the sector than there are places available, which has an impact on the morale of the people already working there. We are losing people as a consequence. Retention is becoming a problem because recruitment is such a problem. People feel under such weight. With such a small workforce, it would not involve an awful lot of effort to significantly increase that. We need to invest in training to bring clinical oncologists and clinical radiologists into the profession, and also to alleviate the pressure that staff are under now by supporting new admin staff up-front, which could be done very quickly, to allow people currently in the profession to be able to concentrate more on their frontline duties, rather than on admin.

I will make a final remark regarding radiotherapy, which is about access. Among the reasons why only 27% of people with cancer are getting radiotherapy in England—as opposed to the 53% who really should—is that many people, particularly in my community, are just too far away from the treatment. In our communities, the majority of patients using our nearest radiotherapy centre are making two or three-hour round trips every single day. The national radiotherapy advisory group says that it is bad practice for people to have to travel more than 45 minutes for treatment—never mind three-hour round trips every day for 30 days. As a consequence, some people do not get referred for treatment at all, or may even make the choice themselves not to finish that treatment. There is no doubt that that is having an impact on survival rates.

We have built a strong case, in our community, for a radiotherapy satellite unit from the Rosemere unit in Preston—our nearest unit—to be deployed at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal. A solid clinical and business case was put for that, and I would be grateful if the Minister might agree to meet with me, even for just 15 minutes, to review that and consider the extent to which the Department might be able to get behind it and other satellite units around the country that could cut waiting times and save lives.

There are no silver bullets to many problems that we face in this place, but this is quite close to being one. For a relatively small amount of money, the UK Government could do something that would save lives, and do so quickly. I encourage them to do so.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson, Feryal Clark.

5.1 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I will start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing this important debate. I offer my sincere condolences on the passing of her mother and close relatives. I also want to praise the contributions of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

Many important organisations do amazing work around this subject, including Cancer Research UK and Macmillan—the list goes on. We are grateful for all of the work that they do. Like me, those organisations are incredibly worried about the future of cancer care.

As hon. Members have set out, we all know that the best way to improve cancer care and survival rates is by diagnosing and treating cancer early. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle, the Public Accounts Committee report on NHS England's backlogs and waiting times found that waiting times for cancer were

“at their worst recorded level”.

Responding to those findings, the chief executive of the NHS confederation said that “a decade of austerity” had left it to “grapple 133,000 staff vacancies” and “a shortage of key equipment”.

We have a health service gripped by a funding and workforce crisis. It is a terrible indictment of the Government's policy on cancer care, and I know that that will concern Members across the House. The current Chancellor himself recognises that. He said that Labour's workforce plan was

“something I very much hope the government also adopts on the basis that smart governments always nick the best ideas of their opponents.”

I very much hope that, in tomorrow's Budget, he takes his own advice and adopts Labour's plans to double the number of medical school places and train an extra 10,000 nurses to alleviate some of the issues in the NHS.

The current waiting times are out of control. The Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust—a trust that is very close to my own constituency and is used by my constituents—found that only 79% of people saw a specialist within 14 days of an urgent suspected cancer referral in January 2023, missing NHS England's target of 93%. If the target was met, around 520 additional patients would have had cancer diagnosed or ruled out on time. That contrasts with when Labour left government, when over 95% of patients were seen within two weeks.

Ministers point to the impact of covid, but we entered the pandemic with record waiting lists, and cancer targets were repeatedly being missed. Indeed, cancer patients have been waiting longer for care every year since 2010. Will the Minister explain how the Government plan to get a grip on cancer care, and co-ordinate the strategy to cut waiting times? They are truly devastating for patients and families around the country.

It is not only diagnostics that are the issue. The NHS foundation that I just mentioned found in January that only 39% of patients started treatment within 62 days of

an urgent suspected cancer referral, missing NHS England's target of 85%. Only 39%; that is a damning indictment. It represents a two-month period of uncertainty for patients and families in this country over their future. Those stats are extremely concerning, for the reasons mentioned by Members throughout the debate. The longer patients wait for a diagnosis or treatment, the less their chance of survival.

It does not seem as though the human cost of inaction has fully registered with the Government. The key reason for the lack of staff is that, although NHS staff are working incredibly hard, there are simply not enough of them. Earlier, we identified 133,000 staff vacancies. If we look closer at those vacancies, according to the Health and Social Care Committee's report on cancer services, on a full-time equivalent basis, we are due to be short of 189 clinical oncologists, 390 consultant pathologists, 1,939 radiologists and more than 3,300 specialist cancer nurses by 2030. The report is critical of the Government for lacking any serious plan to address that. We can all agree with that judgment.

In a statement in autumn 2022, the Government committed to publishing a comprehensive workforce plan in 2023, including an independently verified forecast for the number of doctors, nurses and other professionals who will be needed in five, 10 and 15 years' time. What level of detail will be included in the published plan, and to what degree will there be transparency in projected staffing numbers in key specialist areas?

Promises of a dedicated 10-year cancer plan did not materialise last year, as we have heard. Ministers are instead consulting on a separate major conditions strategy. I know how disappointed the organisations I outlined earlier are about that. For example, Cancer Research UK stated:

“It is therefore extremely disappointing the promised plan will no longer be published and will instead be replaced by a 5-year Major Conditions Strategy, of which cancer will be only one part”.

What is that delay going to do to the future of cancer care, and how many patients will be affected? There seems to be a common theme of delayed reviews and empty promises with this Government. Patients need action now. The number of cancer cases is continuing to grow, and the future of cancer care is increasingly uncertain. It is vital that the Government ensure that they have a long-term strategic plan across cancer pathways. More work is needed everywhere with cancer care, including on prevention efforts, tackling the backlog, and chronic workforce shortages—the list goes on.

I will finish with some optimism for the future of cancer care. There have been huge advances in science, medicine and technology, and Britain has been leading the way. That gives us hope for the future, but cancer patients and their families need the Government to solve the huge problems in the NHS, starting with the workforce, in order to get the waiting lists down, get early diagnoses up and transform survival rates for cancer patients. We need a plan and we need to see some action; I look forward to hearing the Minister tell us how the Government intend to deliver that.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure, Mr Paisley, to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing this debate on cancer care. According to Cancer Research UK, one in two people—half of us—will develop cancer at some point in their lives. There are around 290,000 new cancer diagnoses a year, or nearly 800 every day.

When we cite statistics such as these—as is the case with NHS waiting lists, for instance, across the board—I always remember that every one of the figures is about a human being. Whether it is a parent, a child or a grandparent, they are someone's loved one. And every one of them will be worried, or even scared, about their diagnosis; their lives are disrupted and they may be living in pain.

My hon. Friend brought that to life in her speech from her own personal experience. May I express my very sincere condolences to her for the loss of her mother? Such a loss is so sad, especially as it came too soon; I believe that her mother was only in her 50s when she died last year. My thoughts are also with her staff member Bradley, who she mentioned, whose mother would have been 58 today. Also, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned his mother, who very sadly died of cancer. So this is a moment to think about mothers, perhaps particularly with mother's day coming up. My best friend in childhood lost her mother to cancer when we were in our teens, and I clearly remember how that was for her. And there are so many other people who have lost loved ones to cancer, too often before their time. That is why diagnosis and treatment of cancer is so important to so many of us.

My hon. Friend rightly spoke about the importance of early diagnosis and prompt treatment. They are important for everybody. However, she particularly talked about areas with higher rates of cancer and the above-average levels of cancer in her own area. As she said, health disparities are part of the problem and they must be tackled, too.

Clearly, and rightly, my hon. Friend keeps a close eye on the performance in her area. I see my job as a Minister to look across the whole country and to help our healthcare system to tackle variation in performance, and indeed to level up where there are inequalities, because everybody should have access to early diagnosis of cancer and effective treatment for it.

Right now, I have three priorities for cancer: one is to recover from the pandemic and reduce the pandemic backlog; the second is to improve early diagnosis and treatment, using the tools and technologies that we have; and the third is for there to be investment in research and innovation, and for those innovations to be developed to make a difference to people's lives and to the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. We know that technologies such as genomics and artificial intelligence, for instance, have the potential to truly transform our ability to diagnose and treat cancer effectively as a society.

Peter Dowd: Yesterday, I received an email from Sarah Taylor on behalf of the #CatchUpWithCancer and Radiotherapy4Life campaign. Among other things, she indicated that in May 2022 over half the heads of radiotherapy departments wrote to the Health Secretary and warned that

“radiotherapy is at crisis point”.

However, to our knowledge, so far they have not had a reply from the Department. Will the Minister try to chase that up if I provide her with further information?

Helen Whately: I will come on to talk about radiotherapy, but I can say to the hon. Gentleman here and now that I will indeed look into what has happened to the response to that letter.

However, I will start by talking about the waiting times, recovery from the pandemic and reduction of the pandemic backlog. Our elective recovery plan included the ambitious target to return the number of people waiting for more than 62 days for an urgent cancer referral back to pre-pandemic levels by this month. Since the publication of that recovery plan, the NHS has seen enormously high demand for cancer checks. More than 2.8 million people were seen in the 12 months to January 2023—up by 19% compared with the same period before the pandemic. The return in demand, with people coming forward for cancer checks, is very positive after the falls we saw in the pandemic.

When giving evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee last week, Dame Cally Palmer, NHS England's national cancer director, said that

“we are not going to meet the pre-pandemic target by the end of March, simply because of those record levels of demand.”

That is already in the public domain. However, I assure hon. Members that we are working closely with NHS England to reduce the time people are waiting to receive a diagnosis, or an all-clear, and to start treatment, and we are making progress on that. The latest published figures show that the 62-day cancer backlog for the week ending 26 February stood at just over 22,000, which is a fall of 35% since its peak in the pandemic. However, that is 22,000 people too many who have had to wait 62 days, and many of them will have had to deal with the anxiety of waiting for a diagnosis or an all-clear, which is why we are working so hard on this issue with NHS England.

As I said, it is good that more people have come forward for cancer checks but, in response, we must increase our capacity to diagnose and treat cancer. That is one reason why we have been investing in community diagnostic centres, and we have more than 93 centres open and operational. That is why the NHS is rolling out what we call fit tests to speed up diagnosis for people who may have, for instance, bowel cancer. That is why the NHS is rolling out teledermatology to speed up diagnosis for people who may have skin cancer, and speeding up access to MRI scans for people who might have prostate cancer. Those are the three types of cancer with the most people waiting for a diagnosis or an all-clear or, if they have a diagnosis, to start treatment, and I am determined to reduce those waits.

When I meet charities and clinicians, the one message I consistently hear is how important early diagnosis is for improving patient outcomes and care, and that was something my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East referred to. She talked about the ambition in our long-term plan to be diagnosing 75% of cancers at stages 1 or 2 by 2028. As part of achieving that, we are extending targeted lung health checks, with more than double the number of community lung truck sites. The targeted lung health checks programme had diagnosed 1,625 lung cancers by the end of December 2022, with 76% of those diagnosed at an earlier stage.

To help people get a cancer diagnosis or an all-clear more quickly, since November GPs have been able to directly order diagnostic tests such as CT scans, ultrasounds

[Helen Whately]

or brain MRIs for patients with concerning symptoms who fall outside the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's guideline threshold for urgent referral. Alongside that, community pharmacists in pilot areas are helping to spot signs of cancer in people who might not have noticed symptoms or realised their significance, and we continue to see non-specific symptom pathways rolled out. As of December 2022, more than 100 are live across the 21 cancer alliances.

To encourage people to contact their GP if they notice, or are worried about, symptoms that could be cancer, NHS England has run the "Help Us, Help You" campaign, which seeks to address the barriers deterring patients from accessing the NHS if they are concerned they might have cancer. In March and June 2022, we saw a 1,600% increase in the number of visits to the NHS website's cancer symptoms landing page, so the campaign had a huge impact on the number of people looking to see whether they might have cancer symptoms. NHS England is in the process of planning "Help Us, Help You" activity for 2023-24, to make sure we continue the momentum and continue to encourage people to come forward if they have worrying symptoms of something that might be cancer.

However, we all know that diagnosis is just the first step on a patient's journey, so we are also taking steps to improve cancer outcomes by rolling out innovative new treatments, such as the potentially life-saving drug pembrolizumab for one of the most aggressive forms of breast cancer, and mobocertinib to treat a specific form of lung cancer. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has made positive recommendations in all 18 of its appraisals of breast cancer medicines since March 2018, and those medicines are now available to NHS patients. NICE is also able to make recommendations to the cancer drugs fund, which has benefited more than 88,000 patients, with 102 medicines receiving funding for treating 241 different cancers.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East mentioned radiotherapy equipment, as did the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale and for Bootle (Peter Dowd). Since 2016, more than £160 million has been invested in radiotherapy equipment so that every radiotherapy provider has access to modern, cutting-edge radiotherapy equipment. That investment enabled the replacement or upgrade of around 100 radiotherapy treatment machines and in some cases the roll-out of new techniques, such as stereotactic ablative radiotherapy. On top of that, £260 million has been invested in establishing two services to deliver proton beam therapy in London and Manchester.

On the workforce, from 2016 to 2021, the number of therapeutic radiotherapy staff grew by more than 17%, and the number of clinical oncologists by more than 24%. From 2021, there has also been an uplift in the number of entry-level places available, with 108 in clinical oncology, up from an average of around 60 per year in previous years.

I want to pick up on the claim that only 27% of cancer patients are treated with radiotherapy. That claim is outdated and incorrect, as it includes radiotherapy only as part of a patient's primary treatment for cancer and does not capture a substantial proportion of patients who receive radiotherapy as a subsequent treatment.

Also, I am told that the data is from 2013-14, so that is also out of date. NHS England has assured me—I have looked into this—that those who need radiotherapy treatment can access it.

Tim Farron: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I want to move on to the major conditions strategy, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East mentioned as well. I want to talk about going beyond the immediate action we are taking here and now to improve people's access to cancer diagnosis and treatment and about what we are doing looking further ahead.

In January, we announced that we will publish a major conditions strategy, which will tackle the conditions that contribute most to morbidity and mortality across the population in England, one of which is cancer. Many people now experience major conditions as part of a wider set of illnesses or needs, known as multi-morbidity. A 2020 academic study of cancer patients in England found that most had at least one co-morbidity and nearly one in two had multiple co-morbidities, so many people with cancer also have another long-term condition. We want to support individuals by diagnosing them earlier, helping conditions to be better managed and improving the overall co-ordination of treatment and care for those who have cancer and other major conditions.

The strategy will draw on the previous work on cancer, and hon. Members mentioned the long-term plan on that. It includes more than 5,000 submissions that were provided as part of our call for evidence last year. I can assure hon. Members that we will continue to work closely with stakeholders, the public and the NHS, including those involved in cancer care, in the coming weeks and months as we work up the details of that strategy. We will look at the health of people at all stages of life and, in reference to the point my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East made on health disparities, focus on the geographical differences in health that contribute to variations in health outcomes.

Tim Farron: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: I just want to spend a little time on research, and I am conscious of the clock ticking.

Tim Farron: She mentioned a couple of points about the figures.

Helen Whately: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to proceed, I want to talk briefly about the third priority—research—which is so important to improving cancer outcomes.

The Department of Health and Social Care invests £1 billion a year in health and care research through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. The NIHR spent almost £100 million on cancer research in 2021-22. I should also say that, among other charities, Cancer Research UK makes a huge contribution to funding research. Thanks to the generosity of the British public, it spent £388 million in 2021 on research activity.

There is a huge amount of research for us to be excited about. For example, the NHS-Galleri trial looks for markers in blood to identify signs of more than 50 cancers, and a vaccine taskforce-style approach is being taken to

invest over £22 million in cancer research as part of the life sciences cancer mission. A memorandum of understanding that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care signed with BioNTech SE will aim to deliver 10,000 doses of personalised therapies to UK patients by 2030.

As another example, just last week I visited Imperial College London. I saw some truly exciting research that could help us to diagnose pancreatic cancer and other upper gastrointestinal cancers early through a relatively simple breath test. It is in its early stages, but it could make a huge difference for cancers such as pancreatic cancer, which can be so hard to diagnose early.

Before I close, I will mention the hospital that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East talked about. The exciting rebuild of the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, as part of our new hospital programme, will bring together urgent care centres from three hospitals across the region into one state-of-the-art site, providing services to 500,000 people. As my hon. Friend said, construction has already commenced, and the hospital should be completed and open for patients in 2024.

The hospital will introduce a new model of care, which means that out-patient clinics, day case surgery and routine diagnostics will be provided from the Sandwell and City Hospital sites, while maternity services, emergency care, general surgery and medical wards will all be based at the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital. The new hospital will be a centre of excellence for clinical care and research. The new therapeutic model of care will encourage patients to maintain mobility and independence during a hospital stay. I spend a lot of time looking at the downside of people having long stays in hospital. Maintaining independence and mobility is an important thing for us to try to achieve. I share my hon. Friend's excitement about the forthcoming opening of the new hospital.

To conclude, I once again thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Improving cancer care is a priority for the Government, and I assure her and other hon. Members that we will continue to work hard to beat this terrible disease.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call Nicola Richards to wind up, I want to offer my personal condolences from the Chair. I thank and commend you for touching on the matter. To all of us—or most of us—our mother is the most precious person in our life. Thank you for the way in which you introduced the debate.

5.27 pm

Nicola Richards: Thank you, Mr Paisley. I also thank everyone who has taken the time to participate in the debate. At the start, I said that cancer will somehow affect every single one of us present. We all have our own experiences of how cancer has touched our lives. It has taken some of those we held most dear and profoundly changed the lives of those who have survived it. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who also lost his mother far too early. I thank all other hon. Members who intervened and contributed.

It is crucial to remember that behind every statistic, there are thousands of people whose lives have been turned upside down. With every stride we take towards earlier diagnosis and more effective treatment, there will be fewer families out there grieving for the loss of a loved one. I know that the Government and the Minister understand that completely. I thank her for responding, and the Government for declaring a war on cancer. I look forward to working with her to ensure that this country becomes a world leader in cancer care.

I also thank Cancer Research UK, without whom my mum would not have been diagnosed early. In 2016, when I attended a Cancer Research race for life, a lady bravely stood on stage and talked about finding a dimple as the first sign. I went home and told my mother, and that is how she was diagnosed early. I thank all the charities for all their work, including CoppaFeel! and Breast Cancer Now. Finally, I thank you once again, Mr Paisley. It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of cancer care.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 14 March 2023

DEFENCE

Single Source Defence Contracts 2023-24: Baseline Profit Rate

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I am today announcing that I have set the baseline profit rate for single source defence contracts at 8.29%, in line with the rate recommended by the Single Source Regulations Office (SSRO). This is a decrease of 0.02 percentage points from 2022-23. I have accepted the methodology used by the SSRO to calculate these figures. The “underlying rate” has risen 0.25 percentage points from 8.19% to 8.44%.

Last year, I removed financial year 2020-21 from the calculation of the profit rate to reduce the long-term effect of covid on our suppliers’ profit. The SSRO have taken the same approach this year. A full explanation of their methodology is published on their website.

I am also announcing the capital servicing rates and an SSRO funding adjustment, as recommended by the SSRO, which can be found at Table 1 below. These rates have been published in the *London Gazette*, as required by the Defence Reform Act 2014.

All of these new rates will come into effect from 1 April 2023.

Table 1: Recommended Rates agreed by the Secretary of State for Defence

Element	2022 rates	2023 rates
Baseline profit rate (BPR) (% on contract cost)	8.31%	8.29%
Baseline profit rate to apply to contracts between the Secretary of State and a company wholly owned by the UK Government and where both parties agree (% on contract cost)	0.046%	0.038%
Fixed capital servicing rate (% on fixed capital employed)	3.27%	2.9%
Working capital servicing rate (% on positive working capital employed)	1.33%	1.67%
Working capital servicing rate (% on negative working capital employed)	0.65%	0.51%
SSRO funding adjustment	0.046%	0.038%

[HCWS632]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Public Health Grant Allocations: Local Authorities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O’Brien): Today I am publishing the Public Health Grant allocations to local authorities in England for 2023-24, along with indicative allocations for 2024-25.

Funding for local government’s health responsibilities is an essential element of our commitment to invest in preventing ill health, promoting healthier lives and addressing health disparities and an important complement to our plans to invest strongly in both health and social care.

The 2021 spending review confirmed that the level of funding for the public health grant to local authorities would increase over the spending review period, and all local authorities received a 2.8% increase in 2022-23 taking the public health grant to £3.417 billion.

In 2023-24, through the public health grant and the pilot of 100% retained business rate funding for local authorities in Greater Manchester, we are increasing funding to £3.529 billion, providing each local authority with a 3.3% cash terms increase. To help local authorities plan ahead, we are also publishing today indicative allocations for 2024-25, on the basis of a further 1.3% cash uplift which would take 2024-25 funding to £3.575 billion. This will provide every local authority with real-terms funding protection in each of the next two years.

These allocations include baselining of local government funding of £1.4 million a year for their enforcement duties under the Botulinum Toxin and Fillers (Children) Act 2021.

The allocations I am announcing today are part of a wider package of investment in public health services. This includes additional targeted investment up to 2025 of £516 million going to local authorities to improve drug and alcohol addiction treatment and £170 million to improve the Start for Life services available to families with a majority allocated to 75 local authority areas, as part of the joint DfE and DHSC £300 million Family Hubs and Start for Life programme.

This overall funding package will deliver a real-terms increase of more than 5% in DHSC investment in local authority public health functions over the next two years, enabling local authorities to invest in prevention of ill health and in essential frontline services.

The 2023-24 the public health grant will continue to be subject to conditions, including a ring-fence requiring local authorities to use the grant exclusively for public health activity.

Full details of the public health grant allocations to local authorities for 2023-24 and indicative allocations for 2024-25 can be found on www.gov.uk and are attached. This information has been communicated to local authorities in a Local Authority Circular.

[HCWS633]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Building Safety

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): On 30 January 2023, the Government published the developer remediation contract and gave an initial cohort of developers six weeks to sign it. The deadline expired yesterday and I wish to share the responses.

I can today confirm that 39 developers have signed the contract. A list of those developers has been published on gov.uk. These developers represent a substantial proportion of our housing market. By signing the contract, they have irreversibly committed to fixing at least 1,100 buildings at a cost to themselves of more than £2 billion.

The contract gives effect to the self-remediation pledge that the largest house-builders signed last year. It requires signatories to fix all life-critical fire-safety defects in all buildings in England over 11 metres that they had a role in developing or refurbishing. It also requires them to reimburse the taxpayer where Government funds have already paid for remediation, with that money being used to make other buildings safe faster.

I wish to place on the record my appreciation for the lengths that developers have gone to to agree this contract, and the significant commitments that it entails. It is a testament to the sense of responsibility that I know is felt throughout the industry. It also reflects the determination that we all share to protect leaseholders from unjust costs. In that spirit, we will of course monitor the performance of obligations under the contract. These will begin with their informing leaseholders that they have accepted responsibility for buildings, and set out timescales for work to commence.

A total of 11 eligible developers that were invited to sign the contract have not yet done so. Some have asked reasonable questions about the arrangements for payments. Others have simply not got themselves organised, have failed to engage in time, or have not arranged their internal governance in good time. In accordance with provisions in the Building Safety Act, the Government will publish further information next week on how developers will be prohibited from commencing or completing developments in England, unless they sign and adhere to the contract. Regulations will, with Parliament's consent, establish the responsible actors scheme and set out the criteria for membership. Developers who do not sign the contract will be ineligible to join the scheme, and subject to the prohibitions. A list of developers that are yet to sign the contract has been published on gov.uk today.

The signing of this contract by so many developers is an acceptance of their share in our collective responsibility for building safety and brings us closer to resolving the issue for leaseholders and tenants.

Let me take this opportunity, once again, to apologise to those leaseholders, and others, who have waited so long for this work to be done. While there is still much to do, I hope that today does show that your campaigning has not been in vain.

The Government will continue to remove dangerous cladding from buildings whose developers have not signed the contract or cannot be traced, using its building safety funds.

[HCWS634]

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet Committees

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Today I am publishing an updated Cabinet Committees list. I have placed a copy of the new list in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS627]

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): On 7 February, I announced the creation of four new Government Departments: the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero; the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; the Department for Business and Trade; and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Following the implementation of those changes, I am announcing the following changes to the sponsorship of public bodies and regulators by these new Departments.

The United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority will be sponsored by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, under the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. This will support the Secretary of State in his role to position the UK as a leader in sustainable nuclear energy.

The Information Commissioner's Office will be sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, under the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. This will enable the Secretary of State to deliver an innovative and effective approach to the use of personal data, which forms part of the UK's approach to data protection including on artificial intelligence policy and regulation.

The Copyright Tribunal will now be appointed by the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, supported by the tribunal's close links with the Intellectual Property Office, which also sits in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

The Office of Communications (Ofcom) and the Phone-paid Services Authority, which will shortly be merged into Ofcom, will now sit with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, under the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. This will ensure that policy responsibility for the majority of Ofcom's regulatory remit sits in one Department, while recognising that Ofcom will retain a close relationship with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on broadcasting policy and the Department for Business and Trade on matters relating to the regulation of the Post Office.

[HCWS630]

TRANSPORT

National Networks National Policy Statement

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Today I am laying before Parliament the draft revised National Networks National Policy Statement.

The National Networks National Policy Statement was designated in 2015. It sets out the need for development of road, rail and strategic rail freight interchange projects on the national networks, and the policy against which decisions on major road and rail projects will be made. The National Networks National Policy Statement provides guidance to applicants in preparing, and the Secretary of State (Mr Mark Harper) in determining, applications for development consent orders for national network infrastructure projects.

The Government announced a review of the current National Networks National Policy Statement in a written ministerial statement in July 2021 in light of net zero commitments, including the Transport Decarbonisation Plan. I have today launched a public consultation on a draft of a revised National Networks National Policy Statement, as well as supporting habitats and sustainability reports, and associated appendices. These are subject to a 12-week public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny in parallel, and are all available on www.gov.uk.

I will place copies of the public consultation document, the Appraisal of Sustainability and its appendices, and the Habitats Regulation Assessment in the Library of the House. The public consultation will close on 6 June 2023. The relevant period for parliamentary scrutiny will be from 14 March 2023 to 20 October 2023.

The review of the National Networks National Policy Statement is being progressed as part of the Government's Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects Action Plan, which will ensure that the planning process for the development of projects is as clear and efficient as possible. I have asked my officials to complete the review of the National Networks National Policy Statement as quickly as possible during 2023.

[HCWS629]

Ports National Policy Statement: Review

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): The Government are committed to a strong planning regime for nationally significant infrastructure which properly takes into account impacts on the natural environment, air quality and valued landscapes, and the views of local communities affected by development.

The National Policy Statement for Ports was published in 2012. While the statement continues to provide an appropriate framework for planning decisions in relation to ports infrastructure development and associated development, such as road and rail links, it is important to ensure the statement continues to support decision making effectively.

In the Freeports Bidding Prospectus, the Government set out their intention to review the National Policy Statement for Ports in 2021. I am today announcing a

review of the National Policy Statement for Ports under the provisions of the Planning Act 2008. This review will include a thorough examination of the modelling and forecasts that support the statement of need for development, and the environmental, safety, resilience, and local community considerations that planning decisions must take into account. Reviewing the National Policy Statement for Ports will ensure that it remains fit for purpose in supporting the Government's commitments for appropriate development of infrastructure for ports and associated road and rail links.

For the avoidance of doubt, the existing National Policy Statement for Ports will remain in full effect during the period of the review. Any current or upcoming applications for development consent will be assessed under the current National Policy Statement for Ports.

[HCWS628]

WALES

Contingencies Fund Advance: Wales

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I hereby give notice of the Wales Office's intention to seek a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund. The Department requires an advance to meet an urgent cash requirement pending parliamentary approval of the supplementary estimate 2022-23.

The Welsh Government are operating within their budgets, so this does not represent additional spending. However, an increase in net cash requirement will be sought in the supplementary estimate, so accessing the Contingencies Fund will allow the Welsh Government to fund this existing spending in the meantime.

Parliamentary approval for additional non-budget expenditure of £150,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Wales Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £150,000,000 will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid immediately following Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill in March.

[HCWS631]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 14 March 2023

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Workforce Expansion

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on NHS Workforce Expansion on 28 February 2023.

Helen Whately: I was talking about some of the things that we have done to vastly increase the number of healthcare professionals in the NHS. As part of our ambitions for the future, more than 26,000 students were accepted on to nursing and midwifery courses in England last year—a 28% increase on 2019.

[Official Report, 28 February 2023, Vol. 728, c. 678.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave in the Opposition day debate on NHS Workforce Expansion.

The correct statement should have been:

Helen Whately: I was talking about some of the things that we have done to vastly increase the number of healthcare professionals in the NHS. As part of our ambitions for the future, more than 26,000 students were accepted on to nursing and midwifery courses in England last year—a **16%** increase on 2019.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Autism and ADHD Assessments

The following are extracts from the debate on Autism and ADHD Assessments in Westminster Hall on 6 February 2023.

Maria Caulfield: NICE has a recommendation that autism assessments should be done within 13 weeks of referral and we know that in many cases that recommendation is not being met.

[Official Report, 6 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 242WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave.

The correct statement should have been:

Maria Caulfield: NICE has a recommendation that autism assessments should **begin** within 13 weeks of referral and we know that in many cases that recommendation is not being met.

Maria Caulfield: NHS England has developed a framework that is transforming learning from autism and ADHD pilot schemes into scalable action, which will improve support and care for people across the country.

[Official Report, 6 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 243WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave.

The correct statement should have been:

Maria Caulfield: NHS England has developed a framework that is transforming learning from **autism pilot schemes** into scalable action, which will improve support and care for people across the country.

Maria Caulfield: That is making a difference by supporting young people with mental health issues, but it is also about identifying whether they could have an ADHD or autism diagnosis and getting them into the system much more quickly.

[Official Report, 6 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 243WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave.

The correct statement should have been:

Maria Caulfield: That is making a difference by supporting young people with mental health issues, but **might also include** identifying whether they could have an ADHD or autism diagnosis and **working as part of an integrated referral system** by getting them into the system much more quickly.

Maria Caulfield: I will touch on a final point, raised by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), which was that ADHD is under-diagnosed in women and girls. She is absolutely right, and that is because the symptoms and signs are very different in girls as opposed to boys and men. We are looking at that in the women's health strategy.

[Official Report, 6 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 244WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave.

The correct statement should have been:

Maria Caulfield: I will touch on a final point, raised by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), which was that ADHD is under-diagnosed in women and girls. She is absolutely right, and that is because the symptoms and signs are very different in girls as opposed to boys and men. We are looking at **sex-differences in health conditions** in the women's health strategy.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY**Genomics and National Security**

The following is an extract from the debate on Genomics and National Security in Westminster Hall on 8 March 2023.

George Freeman: We have set up RCAT as a specialist advisory group in the Cabinet Office, connected to our intelligence agencies, so that it can check quickly whether a partner is benign, hostile or dangerous.

[Official Report, 8 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 119WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

George Freeman: We have set up RCAT as a specialist advisory group in the **Department for Science, Innovation and Technology**, connected to our intelligence agencies, so that it can check quickly whether a partner is benign, hostile or dangerous.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 14 March 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	671	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—continued	
Argentina: 2016 Joint Communiqué on the Falklands	682	Israel and Palestine	671
Beneficial Ownership Transparency Measures	684	Nigerian Elections.....	685
Cox's Bazar Refugee Camp.....	684	Persecuted Christians: Bishop of Truro's Review ...	683
Girls' Access to Education	675	Sanctioned Russian Assets	679
Hunger Crisis in East Africa	677	Topical Questions	686
Iran: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.....	681	Tunisia: Human Rights.....	683
		Turkey and Syria Earthquakes	680

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 14 March 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	33WS	PRIME MINISTER	35WS
Single Source Defence Contracts 2023-24: Baseline Profit Rate	33WS	Cabinet Committees.....	35WS
		Machinery of Government	36WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	33WS	TRANSPORT	36WS
Public Health Grant Allocations: Local Authorities	33WS	National Networks National Policy Statement.....	36WS
		Ports National Policy Statement: Review	37WS
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	34WS	WALES	38WS
Building Safety.....	34WS	Contingencies Fund Advance: Wales	38WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Tuesday 14 March 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	3MC	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY..	5MC
Autism and ADHD Assessments.....	3MC	Genomics and National Security	5MC
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	3MC		
NHS Workforce Expansion	3MC		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 21 March 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 14 March 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 671] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

HS2: Revised Timetable and Budget [Col. 695]
Answer to urgent question—(Huw Merriman)

BBC: Government Role in Impartiality [Col. 714]
Answer to urgent question—(Julia Lopez)

Building Safety [Col. 727]
Statement—(Michael Gove)

AUKUS Defence Partnership [Col. 739]
Statement—(Alex Chalk)

Planning (Quarries) [Col. 753]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Paul Holmes)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business

Ukrainian Refugees: Homelessness [Col. 756]
Motion—(Bob Blackman)—agreed to

Russian Assets: Seizure [Col. 773]
Motion—(Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 802]

Proscribed Psychedelic Drugs [Col. 805]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

London Zoo Lease [Col. 241WH]

Knife Crime: West Midlands [Col. 253WH]

Single-parent Families [Col. 262WH]

Middlesbrough Development Corporation [Col. 282WH]

Cancer Care [Col. 291WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 33WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 3MC]
