

**Thursday
23 March 2023**

**Volume 730
No. 140**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 23 March 2023

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Duties of Economic Regulators: Utilities

1. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What recent progress she has made on updating the statutory duties of economic regulators in the utilities sectors. [904242]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): We are committed to bringing forward a consultation in the coming months on proposals to reform our approach to economic regulation in the utilities sector. This will include the outcomes of our review of the regulators' statutory duties.

John Penrose: I welcome the bright and shiny new ministerial team to their roles, and I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, as the new broom, to get this moving a lot faster. Some economic regulators are too expensive, too slow and too soft, so could we use the upcoming competition Bill to refocus them on sharper competition so that consumers get better deals and fewer rip-offs, because otherwise we will miss the best opportunity for years?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is quite right. As set out in our policy paper, the duties and functions of Ofwat, Ofcom and Ofgem have significantly expanded since privatisation. I agree that the Bill would enable us to move more quickly, and I would like to work with him to see what we can do to improve regulation more broadly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to this important question. All our constituents are squeezed due to rising prices over which they have no control. In the light of her response, and in anticipation of her correspondence with the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), I hope that we can increase accountability and reduce prices, and thereby reduce inflation, which will help our constituents.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman is right that our constituents are at the end of what the regulators are doing, so our reforms should build on their strengths

and continue to reinforce the UK as a leading global destination for investment in utilities infrastructure, to the long-term benefit of all our constituents and consumers.

Corporate Responsibility

2. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of businesses' actions on corporate responsibility. [904243]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government are rightly proud of the record of UK companies when it comes to corporate responsibility. The UK is home to 10 of the world's top 100 companies, ranked by social responsibility. These standards are reflected in the UK being considered by business leaders to be the world's third most important country for investment.

Dan Carden: The Government have recently taken action on deforestation in supply chains through the Environment Act 2021, and they have made progress on regulating British companies overseas through the Bribery Act 2010 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015, but I want them to go further. The Cerrejón coalmine in La Guajira, Colombia, has been responsible for widespread, persistent, harmful pollution, and for the diverting and polluting of many rivers, causing the displacement of more than 20 indigenous communities. The companies involved have ignored local court rulings. What more can be done to ensure that businesses registered in the UK uphold human rights and do not commit environmental damage? Will the Minister look again at this case?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises an important case. The UK is a signatory to the OECD's declaration on international investment and multinational enterprises, a voluntary set of standards intended to promote responsible business conduct worldwide. My Department is the UK's national contact point on these guidelines, allowing anyone who thinks there are problems to make a complaint, which will then be investigated. I am very happy to work with him on that basis.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Will my hon. Friend update the House on any recent discussions that he or his Department have had with the Home Office on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill?

Kevin Hollinrake: I regularly meet Home Office colleagues, including this week to make sure this legislation is fit for purpose and will do what it says on the tin: tackle economic crime.

Critical Minerals

3. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help protect critical minerals supply chains. [904244]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I wish everybody a happy Ramadan on our first day of fasting.

We are moving towards a world powered by critical minerals. We need lithium, cobalt and graphite to make batteries for electric cars, and we need silicon and tin for our electronics. I am pleased that we recently published our “Critical Minerals Refresh.” This strategy will accelerate the growth of UK capabilities, collaborate with international partners and enhance international markets.

Mrs Murray: Cornwall is known for its mining—some people even define a mine as a hole in the ground with a Cornishman at the bottom. What efforts is the Department making to ensure that we make the most of our home-grown mineral security?

Ms Ghani: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House of Cornwall’s mining heritage and the world-renowned Camborne School of Mines. This is why we are backing Cornish lithium and geothermal engineering, through the Getting Building fund and the automotive transformation fund, which are collaborating to build a zero-carbon lithium extraction plant at an existing site in Cornwall. I very much look forward to visiting it in the near future.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The Minister knows that the steel industry is an important customer for critical minerals in this country, so will she confirm for the House the status of the Steel Council in her Department and whether it is actively meeting?

Ms Ghani: I served with the hon. Gentleman on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for many years. He will be very familiar with the fact that I meet the steel sector and the unions, and I have all the regular meetings, including those with the all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal related industries, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). The meetings are most definitely taking place.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I join the Minister in wishing the whole House a happy Ramadan.

It is great finally to see the critical minerals strategy, but, as the Minister indicated in her answer, long-term, durable access to minerals is also dependent on our wider strategic trade policy. The Government have failed in their objective of ensuring that 80% of our trade is conducted under free trade agreements. In addition, the Office for Budget Responsibility says that our exports are projected to fall by 6.6% next year. How does she propose to integrate her critical minerals strategy with our wider trade policy? How much will that 6.6% fall in exports cost the UK economy in cash terms?

Ms Ghani: I only recently published the critical minerals refresh and I was expecting some sort of positive response, given how it is integrated internationally; it deals with the threats of China and works with the Inflation Reduction Act 2022 in the United States. But of course the Opposition use any reason to dampen a positive step forward for all of our manufacturing sector across the country. UK exports to Europe amounted to £386.9 billion in the four quarters to the end of 2022, which was an increase of 25%—I think that is an increase, not a decrease.

Industrial Strategy

4. **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): If she will take steps to publish a new industrial strategy. [904245]

14. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): If she will take steps to publish a new industrial strategy. [904257]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Prime Minister has made it clear that growing the economy and creating better-paid jobs is one of our top priorities, and the Government are working with industry across the UK to achieve that. We have set out clear plans for prioritising technology sectors, advanced manufacturing, financial services and creative industries, and this includes our investor road maps. In particular, the Chancellor has announced 12 investment zones across the UK, which could benefit from £80 million of interventions over the next five years.

Mary Glindon: The Government have not published an industrial strategy since 2017 and, as a result, the UK now has the lowest level of business investment in the G7. So what is the Minister’s plan to encourage business investment in the UK, given that the Government have not even published an industrial strategy?

Ms Ghani: I think the hon. Lady has misunderstood exactly what we are doing. We have industrial strategies, be it for the automotive sector, the aviation sector, the maritime sector, or science and tech—that one was published just yesterday. This is not just about publishing strategies; it is also about delivering, which is what we are cracking on with and doing. As for UK investment, we are the leading country for start-up capital outside the United States, and just a few weeks ago we attracted £20 billion into tech—this is twice as much as France and Germany.

Mick Whitley: While the EU and the US are investing billions in accelerating their transition to net zero, including through the Inflation Reduction Act, the lack of a robust green industrial strategy in Britain is leaving us stranded at the back of the pack. Does the Minister share my frustration that the Chancellor’s Budget did so little to set out a convincing strategy for green growth? Do the Government intend to make the public wait for Labour to win the next general election before a world-leading green industrial strategy that drives private investment in green industries and establishes the UK as a clean energy superpower is brought before this House?

Ms Ghani: I am sorry to dampen the hon. Gentleman’s ambitions about winning the next general election, but we do indeed have a strategy to deal with decarbonising our economy. We are supporting research and development to help decrease our reliance on gas and electricity and deal with long-term energy security: we have £380 million for the offshore wind sector, £385 million for nuclear R&D, and £120 million for future nuclear enabling. We have a green industrial strategy and we are keen to ensure that we deliver it right across the country, for all of our communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): People in Scunthorpe, Rotherham and Port Talbot know how important steel is for their communities. We Labour Members understand how important it is, for communities and for the green transition. The UK is the only G20 country in which steel production is falling, but when asked about the survival of this strategically important sector, the Business Secretary said:

“Nothing is ever a given.”

Is that because the British steel industry is not safe in her hands?

Ms Ghani: I do not know where the hon. Member got that quote from, but the British steel industry is very safe in our hands. Let me explain why. There has been over £800 million of support for energy costs, and over £1.5 billion to support competitive funds to ensure that the sector can decarbonise. We have done a huge amount of work with our steel sector. Colleagues from across the House will agree that in every meeting, whether it is with the unions or the sector, we are on the side of the steel sector and steelworkers, including when challenging commercial decisions are taken.

Post Office Network

5. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support the post office network. [904246]

16. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support the post office network. [904260]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for the fantastic job she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. I met the Post Office leadership this week to reiterate our commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the post office network. We have funded the network to the tune of £2.5 billion over the last 10 years, and have set access criteria to ensure that vital services remain within local reach of our citizens.

Marion Fellows: I thank the Minister for his kind words. Last month, London Economics issued a report showing that the Post Office has a greater economic impact on the UK than Heathrow airport, with three in 10 small and medium-sized enterprises using it at least once a week. The Minister has said that he will invest lots of money in the post office network, but could he also look at “drop and collect” locations? They have a Post Office lozenge, but they are not the properly functioning post offices that most Members in this House would expect.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Drop and collect locations offer important services for our citizens, and can be counted towards the commitment to having 11,500 branches. Having said that, the access criteria overlaid on that commitment ensure that branches offering core services, including the sale of mail products, access to cash, and banking and bill payment facilities, remain within 3 miles of 99% of our population.

Patrick Grady: The report to which my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) referred found that the social value delivered by the Post

Office is 16.5 times greater than the financial input it receives from the Government, so will the Minister carry out an analysis of how additional investment in the post office network will allow it to continue to grow, so that it can help our communities and small businesses to grow and develop?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very good point. We are working all the time with the Post Office—as I said, there was a meeting earlier this week. Around half of its 11,500 branches are in rural areas. They are hugely important to our local communities, as the hon. Gentleman says. The Government’s funding for the network helps to ensure the viability of rural branches. Of course, this will always be work in progress. We are keen to make sure that the facilities are there for our communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and may I wish Ramadan Mubarak to all those who today mark the beginning of the holiest period in the Islamic year?

The Minister will be aware that the model of sub-post offices is based on the expectation that most of them will be run by small, semi-independent or independent retail businesses. Those businesses are under desperate strain for a number of reasons, some of them within the Government’s control and some not. The people who run these businesses tell me that they are put off the possibility of taking on the responsibility for a sub-post office because it is now more a drag on the business than a benefit. What steps is he taking to review the business model on which sub-post offices operate? It is quite clearly not fit for purpose, and we are getting to crisis point. If it is not changed soon, we will lose even more post offices.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. The model of a post office is evolving to a more diversified approach, but it is important that remuneration is fair and makes post offices sustainable. I was pleased to see that in August 2022 some improvements were made to remuneration. I appreciate that they may not have gone as far as some might wish, but nevertheless we want to see a sustainable network and make sure that our sub-postmasters are fairly remunerated.

Peter Grant: In an hour or two we will hear the latest update on the Horizon compensation scheme. Has the Minister made an assessment of how much damage that scandal has done and is continuing to do to the willingness of businesspeople to take on responsibility for running a sub-post office, given how severely badly treated, and indeed betrayed, so many of their potential colleagues have been in the past?

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, that is a very fair point. It was a horrendous scandal, and the first thing we need to do is properly compensate the victims. Alongside that there is an inquiry going on, headed by Sir Wyn Williams. It is important that we find out exactly what went wrong and who was responsible, and where possible hold those people to account. I think that will restore some measure of confidence to those who have been subject to such disgraceful mistreatment.

Trade with Ukraine

6. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Whether her Department is taking steps to help increase trade with Ukrainian businesses. [904247]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Supporting Ukraine is a Government priority. On Monday, I signed the UK-Ukraine digital trade agreement, Ukraine's first ever digital trade deal, guaranteeing access to the UK's financial services sector, which is crucial for their reconstruction efforts.

Jack Lopresti: My right hon. Friend's Department has this week published a guide to doing business in Ukraine. Can she outline what this industry guidance sets out and how businesses can get further information if they need it?

Kemi Badenoch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the guide to doing business in Ukraine that my Department published. It provides an overview of the Ukrainian market, including setting out Ukraine's reconstruction needs and the expected financing and procurement routes for reconstruction projects. It is accompanied by information on the business environment, trading agreements between our countries and logistical guidance. The information is intended to help businesses considering working in and with Ukraine to understand how their market works and encourage industry to increase trade with Ukraine.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Maybe one of the best ways to assist in increasing trade with Ukraine is to limit the opportunities for the Russian Federation to access Scottish limited partnerships. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is still time to improve and strengthen the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to limit them?

Kemi Badenoch: In co-ordination with our allies, we have implemented the most severe economic sanctions ever imposed on any major economy and will maintain pressure on the Russian regime to secure peace. If the hon. Gentleman will write to me with more detail about what he is referring to, I can look into it, but I assure him that this Government are doing everything we can within the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to ensure the integrity of our economy and our allies.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I also took part in a very sobering visit to Ukraine last month and saw for myself the utter devastation of homes, businesses and infrastructure, with World Bank estimates of reconstruction costs now at some \$630 billion. In spite of warm words, we still have no clear plan from the Government for the seizure of Russian state assets that could be used for the recovery of Ukrainian businesses and the reconstruction of Ukraine. Now that the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Putin, and with the United States, the European Union and Canada already looking to seize assets, can the Secretary of State tell us when the Government will set out how they will seize frozen Russian state assets?

Kemi Badenoch: As I said in my earlier answer, we have introduced the largest and most severe economic sanctions ever imposed on a major economy. We have sanctioned £20 billion, or 96%, of UK-Russia goods trade from 2021. Since the start of the invasion, UK goods imports from Russia have fallen by 99% and goods exports to Russia have fallen by 80%. Sanctions have sent Russia into a severe and sustained economic recession. Of course we will do all we can, but not all of the things the Opposition are asking for have easy mechanisms to deliver.

Occupied Palestinian Territories: Illegal Settlements

7. **Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Whether she plans to advise businesses not to trade with illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [904248]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The UK has a clear position on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: they are illegal under international law and constitute an obstacle to peace and the two-state solution. As set out in Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office guidance on overseas business risk, there are clear risks to UK businesses related to economic and financial activities in the settlements and we do not encourage or offer support to such activity.

Ms Qaisar: Ramadan Mubarak to everyone celebrating.

In January, the Foreign Secretary told the House that the UK Government's position on the illegality of Israeli settlements remains unchanged. If that is the case, will the UK Government finally suspend trade in goods and services between the UK and companies operating in illegal Israeli settlements? Do the Government understand that if not, the UK is essentially legitimising outposts that clearly violate international law?

Nigel Huddleston: The UK's long-established position on the settlements is clear, as I outlined. The UK does not recognise the Occupied Palestinian Territories as part of Israel, including the illegal settlements. For example, goods originating from illegal Israeli settlements in the west bank, including East Jerusalem, are not entitled to tariff or trade preferences under either the agreement that the UK has with Israel or the agreement between the UK and the Palestinian authorities. I think it is important for the House to recognise that, of course, we also have an agreement with the Palestinian authorities.

Rural Microbusinesses

8. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the growth of micro-businesses in rural and isolated communities. [904250]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): As somebody from a business background who also represents a rural area, I fully understand the importance of provision of a range of support to help small and microbusinesses to grow, including those in rural areas. Such businesses can find support through the free business support helpline, the 38 growth hubs across England, and the

newly launched “Help to Grow” website, as well as through start-up loans. I note that 240 businesses on the Isle of Wight have benefited from start-up loans.

Bob Seely: I am delighted that that is the case. I want to tie this question into previous comments about post offices. Some microbusinesses and small businesses are incredibly reliant on post offices and sub-post offices. My sub-postmasters—Andy Smith in Ventnor was the last I spoke to, a couple of weeks ago—are increasingly concerned about the payments regime for sub-post officers. They have asked me to look into several specific instances, and I have written to the Minister about that. One area in which I think we could make improvements is banking payments. Banks are increasingly shutting down. Why? To save money. They pass the responsibilities for cash takes on to sub-postmasters, who do not get the remuneration—or anything like enough—to make it economically worthwhile. Will the Government look at the payments system, specifically in relation to banks?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is an interesting point. That relationship between banks and post offices is important for post offices and the banks, so we urge for fair terms to be struck. We also have concerns about the banking deposit limits that were introduced recently to cover money laundering issues. I am looking into that in great detail and at great pace to ensure that those issues are resolved, because they are limiting remuneration for postmasters, too. I am very happy to take that forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that my constituency has large rural areas and lots of farmers. Like many microbusinesses, they have difficulty in getting a bank account at all. Could he do something or talk to other colleagues about it? Social and trade enterprises cannot get a bank account. Could we get some action on that?

Kevin Hollinrake: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about specific instances, I will be very happy to look at them. There has been a significant increase in the number of new banks entering the marketplace, such as Starling Bank and Tide, so it is getting easier to open a bank account. I know that it is difficult with some of the larger banks. I am very happy to look into the specific instances that he refers to and see if we can help.

Business Insolvencies

10. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of business insolvencies. [904253]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): In total, 22,109 companies entered insolvency in England and Wales in 2022, which was 57% higher than in 2021. There were lower rates of insolvency in 2020-21 because of the measures that we put in place to prevent the foreclosure of certain businesses. The trend over the last three years is pretty consistent with previous trends, but it is something that we are looking at very closely.

Christine Jardine: Notwithstanding that the trend may be consistent, in the last quarter of 2022, 313 companies in Scotland were insolvent. In my Edinburgh West

constituency, companies are struggling, particularly those in the hospitality sector, in which there is high energy use. The Federation of Small Businesses has criticised the Budget by saying that there is nothing for businesses once the energy prices support ends at the end of next month—there is nothing for cashflow; there is nothing for tackling late payments. For the sake of small businesses, will the Government review their decision to take away support for businesses at the end of the month?

Kevin Hollinrake: The Government have not taken away support; they have replaced one scheme with another. The scheme we have now reflects the fact that wholesale prices have come down significantly since the peak between July and December last year. Of course, we are concerned about businesses that are suffering, particularly those that entered into contracts between July and December on fixed rates that last up to a year. We are working with Ofgem and suppliers to see what can be done to ensure that those businesses are not unfairly treated.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the tax cut for business worth £25 billion in the Chancellor’s Budget will benefit national and international businesses in the new powerhouse city of Southend such as Olympus KeyMed and ESSLAB, incentivising investment, boosting growth and delivering more jobs not just in Southend but across the UK?

Kevin Hollinrake: What an excellent question—I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. In previous Budgets, the Chancellor has set the annual investment allowance effectively for SMEs at £1 million; that is permanent policymaking. He has now introduced full expensing across the piece, which, as she says, costs around £9 billion a year. We are the only country in the developed world, to my knowledge, that has done full expensing across the board in that way, and it will be a massive boost to business investment, not least in Southend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Our great British businesses are being let down by 13 years of Tory failure, with little to help but sticking-plaster policies. The Minister may not be aware, but insolvency numbers are at their highest level in four years, which is perhaps no surprise when we look at this Government’s record on small businesses, with Help to Grow: Digital ditched, energy bill support slashed and business investment the lowest in the G7. It is no wonder that the Federation of Small Businesses says that the Budget has left many businesses feeling “short-changed”. It is clear that for this Tory Government, small businesses are an afterthought, so will the Minister follow where Labour leads—reform business rates, boost skills, make Brexit work and make Britain the best place to start and grow a business?

Kevin Hollinrake: I wish I could say I was surprised that the hon. Lady is once again talking Britain down. The reality is that UK growth since 2010 has been the third fastest in the G7. The private sector is now bigger than it was pre-pandemic. Private sector growth has been on trend in terms of other countries, with businesses growing. The FSB says that three out of five businesses

are more resilient than they were pre-pandemic. Of course, we would all like to reform business rates, and it has been looked at on a number of occasions, but simply saying that we will scrap something that would cost £22 billion a year without putting in place a replacement for that funding is irresponsible. What will she do to replace business rates—[*Interruption.*] She made the point. She wants to scrap business rates, but what will replace it with, given that it would cost £22 billion a year?

Energy-intensive Industries

11. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support energy-intensive industries. [904254]

13. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support energy-intensive industries. [904256]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There has been support to the value of about £18 billion for businesses to help them with their energy bills, and we are determined to secure the future for our energy-intensive industries and to protect jobs. To support those most at risk of carbon leakage, the Government have announced the British industry supercharger, to support those most exposed to the cost of electricity. Those measures will bring the energy costs of the UK's energy-intensive industries in line with those charged across the world's major economies.

Scott Benton: Many of the tourism and leisure businesses in Blackpool are energy-intensive, not least the world-famous illuminations and pleasure beach, which now pay hundreds of thousands of pounds more for their energy than previously. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the specific challenges around energy consumption facing the tourism industry, ahead of a busy summer season?

Ms Ghani: Once again, my hon. Friend is a stout campaigner for his constituency, and for the tourism and leisure businesses in Blackpool. He will know that the decision about which businesses fall within the EII scheme is for the Treasury; I am not sure whether the £63 million for leisure centres falls within that catchment or not, so of course, I will meet with my hon. Friend to make sure he has the absolute clarity that he needs. The EII relief scheme is in place to support the most energy-intensive industries, but let me sit down with him and work out whether that industry falls within that category.

David Duguid: The Government's support for the energy costs of businesses in my constituency has been most welcome. As the Minister will know, fishing is a key industry there, so I am particularly pleased that the processing and preserving of fish, crustaceans and molluscs is included in the energy and trade intensive industries scheme. Representatives of the Scotch Whisky Association tell me that they are surprised not to be included in that scheme—especially as manufacturers of wine, cider and beer are—despite falling within the top 20% of sectors by energy intensity and the top 40% by trade intensity. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of that industry to discuss this apparent anomaly?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend raises the fishing industry. There are two Back-Bench colleagues present who are huge champions of that industry—I dare not say anything further—and I know that my hon. Friend is a huge promoter of Scottish products, including Scottish whisky. I look forward to a tour post Ramadan at some point soon.

The decision about who falls within the EII scheme was taken by the Treasury. I have been reading about the work that my hon. Friend has been doing on behalf of the sector, and I counter-propose a meeting that involves Treasury officials and Ministers. If my hon. Friend is happy with that, I am more than happy to set it up.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I am honoured to be the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal related industries, and I thank the Secretary of State to agreeing to come and meet us—I am very much looking forward to that discussion. However, may I raise again the issue of her Sky interview in which she said, or certainly strongly implied, that it is not a given that we should have a steel industry in this country? Given the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world, the massive role that steel plays in providing good jobs that people can raise a family on and the vital role it plays in the transition to a decarbonised economy, may I invite the Secretary of State to come to the Dispatch Box and clarify her position—that steel is, in fact, a given in the United Kingdom?

Ms Ghani: Unfortunately, I have to come to the Dispatch Box—that is just the way it works—so I disappoint the hon. Member by not being the Secretary of State. However, he knows that steel is absolutely key to our sovereignty and security and for the resilience of all our sectors. The Secretary of State has mentioned repeatedly that the quotes that are being repeated in the Chamber are a misrepresentation. The commitment to the sector continues. It was in place for years: it is why we had £800 million of support for the energy sector, and it is why we have a £1.5 billion competitive fund to help the sector decarbonise.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Small businesses such as coffee shops and cafés in our high streets are the lifeblood of a local economy—one example would be Jeanie's Coffee Shop in Baillieston. Running a kitchen all day is an incredibly intensive process for energy, and John Devaney was telling me last week how that business's energy bills have gone up. As the Minister is being so generous with other meetings, would she be willing to meet me to look at how we can support businesses such as Jeanie's in Baillieston to ensure that they get through the cost of living crisis?

Ms Ghani: I will be full of meetings, but I defer to the Minister with responsibility for small businesses, who is more than happy to have that meeting. We have provided billions of pounds of support for businesses to deal with their energy costs, and we have the new supercharger in place. We lobby the Treasury long and hard, and we are more than happy to represent businesses small and large.

New York Stock Exchange

12. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make an estimate of the number of UK businesses that chose to list on the New York stock exchange in the last three years. [904255]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The UK is the most internationally connected financial centre in the world. We continue to attract some of the most innovative and largest companies. More than £17 billion of capital was raised for firms in the UK—a 15-year high—with over 120 deals completed. The UK is taking forward ambitious reforms to rules governing its capital markets, building on our continued success as Europe's leading—globally, the second largest—hub for investment.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is Government debt crowding out productive investment?

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend is always so succinct in his questions, and there is often a huge amount of sense behind it. I fundamentally agree that we need to collaborate with business and industry. *[Interruption.]* Forgive me, Mr Speaker. The response I want to give to my right hon. Friend's very good question is that, as he will be pleased to know, there is the Lord Hill listing review and the Sir Douglas Flint review, and in particular the Edinburgh reforms, which will be considering competitiveness and will, I think, provide some sort of answer to his question. It would be remiss of me—because I know that he is particularly interested in this—not to mention that it is 50 years since women were first admitted to the floor of the New York stock exchange after 170 years of just men.

Fashion and Textile Industry

15. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to help support the fashion and textile industry. [R] [904258]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): My Department actively engages and promotes fashion and textile companies domestically and internationally. In 2022, fashion, footwear and textiles exports totalled £7.5 billion. For 2023-24, my Department is providing the British Fashion Council with funding to support London fashion week, and the UK Fashion and Textile Association with funding for activity at key international trade sector shows. To drive sustainability across the sector, we have announced, via UK Research and Innovation, a £15 million circular fashion programme.

Dr Cameron: The Chancellor has set out his long-term plan for growth, including harnessing our creative industries. As has been said, the UK fashion and textile industry already punches well above its weight, employing in excess of 500,000 people, including in Scotland. Will the Department meet the all-party parliamentary group on textiles and fashion to look at what more can be done to harness young fashion designers who want to walk in the wake of such icons as Stella McCartney?

Kemi Badenoch: I would be happy for either officials or a Minister in my Department, depending on diaries, to have a meeting with the APPG. It is a sector that we want to support, and we will do all we can to demonstrate that.

Support for SMEs

17. **Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. [904261]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Through finance, we are making sure that the Government are supporting UK SMEs through our recovery loan scheme and through the start-up loans scheme, which has provided 101,000 loans and nearly £1 billion. On business support, a network of 38 growth hubs across England provides access to information and advice, and we are removing barriers by supporting SMEs seeking to export through the Export Academy, UK Export Finance, cutting red tape and incentivising investment.

Jo Gideon: Businesses and traders in Stoke-on-Trent city centre are supported by the fantastic team at our Hanley business improvement district. This week, with investment from the safer streets fund, they are giving a much-needed facelift to shop fronts in Hope Street, making the gateway route to our city centre more attractive. Does my hon. Friend agree that such initiatives, which make our shopping areas more attractive, are a good investment that encourages business growth locally? Will he join me in congratulating my city centre BID?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is a great pleasure to do so. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work. The money that has been invested in Hope Street will contribute to its being a safer, more welcoming place to visit and shop, which in turn will support the local economy. Regenerating streets such as Hope Street is essential to making our high streets and town centres successful, and I congratulate her on the work she does in this regard.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The financial viability of the high street continues to decline as businesses struggle to compete with online shopping, the impact of which will be felt most keenly in local and small to medium-sized businesses. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chancellor about the urgent need for a long-term, local-scale economic plan to support high streets?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. We have put in place £13.6 billion of business rates support to help businesses over the next few years, but we are also improving access to finance, improving business support through our growth hubs and cutting red tape, making it easier for businesses to start up and scale up in the UK. That work will continue.

Trade: Indo-Pacific

18. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help businesses increase their level of trade in the Indo-Pacific region. [904262]

20. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help businesses increase their level of trade in the Indo-Pacific region. [904264]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): We are currently negotiating accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, a bloc worth £9 trillion of global GDP in 2021. As part of that, our businesses will get

enhanced access to the Malaysian market for the first time. Beyond CPTPP, we are continuing negotiations on the UK-India free trade agreement and working to implement FTAs with Australia and New Zealand, in addition to existing trade dialogues with Indo-Pacific partners.

Sir John Whittingdale: I thank my right hon. Friend for the assistance that her Department gives me in my role as trade envoy to the Republic of Korea. Does she agree that the forthcoming negotiations for an enhanced trade agreement with Korea offer real opportunities for British businesses?

Kemi Badenoch: I do agree, and I would like to thank my right hon. Friend for his tireless work as the trade envoy to promote closer trade links with the Republic of Korea. Our trade relationship with Korea is thriving, no doubt thanks to all his hard work. It amounted to about £14 billion in 2021, much of which is in critical goods such as microchips, cars and pharmaceuticals. It is currently supported by our 2019 FTA, so we are going to start discussions with Korea to review how we can make the FTA even stronger, ensuring it continues to support existing trade and create new opportunities for British business.

Mrs Wheeler: Further to my right hon. Friend's reply, what more specifically can she say about what help His Majesty's Government is giving to South Derbyshire and British businesses as a whole to take advantage of trade opportunities in Cambodia and Laos?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have increased the tempo of trade missions in Cambodia, and we are actively supporting British companies to expand operations in the education, infrastructure and sustainable energy sectors. In May 2022 the Department appointed a new export support service trade officer to help British companies, including those in her constituency, that wish to export to Laos. It is also eligible for preferential treatment under the developing countries trading scheme. Both initiatives will help boost the UK's trade with Laos, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on improving relations with that country.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A Canadian company sponsored by several Pacific island states is poised to begin deep-sea mining at the bottom of the Pacific ocean next year unless we manage to secure a precautionary pause at the International Seabed Authority meetings that are going on at the moment. Will the UK be joining France, Germany, Spain, Chile, New Zealand and some Pacific nations in calling for that precautionary pause, and in what way can we support the economies of Pacific island states without them having to resort to sponsoring such environmentally damaging activities?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and this is a serious matter. The Minister responsible for industry and economic security—the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani)—has been dealing with this issue, and she will get in touch if the hon. Lady writes to her.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Here in the UK, we are rightly proud of our high food standards, which include very low allowable levels of pesticide residues in the food we eat. However, organisations such as the Pesticide Action Network have warned that the Government could weaken standards on pesticides and other factors in a rush to sign free trade agreements in the Indo-Pacific region. Can the Government therefore confirm that new FTAs will not lead to a weakening of standards such as those on pesticide residues in food entering the UK?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We have repeatedly said that we are not lowering food standards at all for any free trade agreements that we are signing. That is something we have committed to, and we would want to reassure all of those who lobby on this issue that our trade negotiators have it very much at the forefront of their minds.

Topical Questions

T1. [904282] **Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): As Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my priority is to support UK companies to thrive at home and abroad. During my visit to Israel this month, I held talks with my counterpart, Nir Barkat, on our upgraded FTA. Israel's economy is booming, its services sector has grown by 45% in the past decade alone and, while in Israel, I met Teva Pharmaceuticals and Trigo, which are involved in pioneering partnerships with the UK. I also saw the Israeli appetite for British expertise in sectors such as fintech and projects such as the £30 billion Tel Aviv metro.

Duncan Baker: Albert Bartlett is a potato processor in my constituency of North Norfolk and one of its largest employers, with 250 staff. Due to water abstraction permits, this and other farming businesses are simply not going to be able to continue trading or even growing in Norfolk if they are not helped. These significant water licensing issues are affecting all of Norfolk. Has my right hon. Friend spoken to DEFRA colleagues about water supply shortages and how they are impacting on businesses growing food, food security and employment all over the UK?

Kemi Badenoch: As set out in the environmental improvement plan, the Government recognise the need to improve the resilience of our water supplies. We are committed to a twin-track approach of investment in new supply infrastructure and action to reduce leaks and improve water efficiency. This includes support for agriculture, such as grants for reservoirs through the farming transformation fund. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs takes decisions on this issue, and we will liaise on my hon. Friend's points and make references to Ofwat, which is the regulator in this case.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The automotive industry is a jewel in the crown of British manufacturing, but to keep that jewel we need to be building batteries for electric vehicles in the UK. So far

we have one gigafactory up and running, while Germany already has 10 times our capacity. Alarm bells are ringing across the sector, and we recently had disappointing news with Ford announcing job cuts in Essex. The Faraday Institution estimates that the UK needs 10 battery factories by 2040 to retain our car industry. Does the Secretary of State agree with that assessment? If she does, how and when will she publish a clear plan for how the Government intend to hit that target?

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have a strategy in place to support the automotive industry, with £1.3 billion of innovative projects, including the Faraday factory challenge —[*Interruption.*] I have a response to the question. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that we have investment in place, so let me continue. With a budget of £544 million, the Driving the Electric Revolution scheme includes nearly £80 million of Government investment through the Innovate UK programme. I suggest that the Opposition Front Benchers flick through my “Critical Minerals Refresh” document, because there is a fantastic page on UK battery supply chains—not just the automotive transformation fund but the Envision AESC announcement, which is worth £1 billion for the north-east electric vehicle hub. Perhaps they will read it before the next Question Time, so that they have a trickier question for us to deal with.

T2. [904283] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): One up-and-coming internet provider in my constituency understands from Building Digital UK that the next roll-out will create a single cross-Devon and Cornwall procurement contract. That will be available only to companies that already have massive turnover, thereby blocking smaller, more agile companies that may be able to deliver contracts faster. Will the Minister review that urgently, if necessary working with others?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, because it gives me an opportunity to point out that that is also an issue in my constituency, and something I am concerned about. Unfortunately, it is a matter for the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, because BDUK is an Executive agency of hers, but if she requires any support from me as Business Secretary, I would be happy to provide it. BDUK is doing a good job in looking at this issue in the round, but we would be happy to help and do whatever we can to support businesses in all our constituencies.

T5. [904287] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The crypto and digital assets all-party group has been informed, shockingly, that many businesses are struggling to even open a UK bank account. What support can be given to address that issue, and ensure that the UK remains an international hub for fintech innovation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): My hon. Friend raises an interesting point, which is similar to the one raised earlier. I am happy to look at any particular instance where businesses cannot open a bank account. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is also interested in this issue, so if my hon. Friend writes to me about any instances I will look into them.

T4. [904285] **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that our creative industries rely on a stable copyright regime to protect thousands of jobs. Can she reassure them that the Government have no plans to weaken our gold-standard intellectual property laws as part of the EU retained law process?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill allows the UK to take the next step in reasserting the sovereignty of Parliament, and ends the special status of retained EU law in the statute book. Reforms will not come at the expense of our already high standards, and we will maintain our commitments to international obligations, including the withdrawal agreement. We will, of course, ensure that the UK’s position as a global leader in the creative industries will not just remain but be strengthened.

T7. [904289] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Every time I speak to those running sub-post offices in my constituency, I hear the same message: the various packages that are available and the business models are simply not sufficient for them to run a viable business. What will the Government do about that, or are we just going to wait until it becomes a crisis?

Kevin Hollinrake: There is no waiting at all and the issue is constantly on our agenda. This week I met the Post Office leadership to look at the sustainability of post offices. We are keen to ensure that the post office network is sustainable, and that sub-postmasters are remunerated fairly. We provide financing to the post office network to ensure it is sustainable, with £2.5 billion over the past 10 years, and that will continue. We are determined to ensure that that network is sustainable and provides those services for our citizens.

T6. [904288] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): This month we are due to have the seventh round of trade talks with our partners in India, working towards a free trade agreement. My right hon. Friend’s predecessor but one promised a free trade deal by Diwali. What assessment has she made about achieving a free trade deal by Diwali this year?

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The Secretary of State has been very clear: it is about the deal, not the date. We will not tie our hands by setting an arbitrary deadline. I am pleased to confirm, however, that round eight of the discussions is currently under way. Both nations have committed to and are working together for a mutually ambitious deal. We are working through substantive issues such as goods, market access, services and investment. I appreciate my hon. Friend’s continuing commitment. It is vital to expand on the deal with India, with £35 billion in bilateral trade sustaining half a million jobs in the two countries.

T8. [904290] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): In all the discussions about the Post Office, the Minister did not mention meeting the trade unions. Is he aware of current research by the Communication Workers Union on the opportunities to develop the role of the Post Office and postal workers within the

communities of Scotland? Will the Minister engage with the trade unions to discuss the work of protecting post office services across these islands?

Kevin Hollinrake: I have met CWU representatives. I am always keen to listen to new ideas on how we make the post office network more sustainable, so yes, I am absolutely willing to do that. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will put them in touch with me.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): May I ask about the CPTPP? Unlike the European Union, this organisation is growing all the time as a percentage of global population and global GDP. When will we finally enter this very exciting trade agreement? When will we have a campaign across the United Kingdom to inform businesses of the tremendous opportunities of us joining the CPTPP? When I talk to my constituents about how excited I am about the CPTPP, they ask me, "What is the CPTPP?"

Kemi Badenoch: For the benefit of my hon. Friend's constituents, the CPTPP is the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, the new trade bloc we hope to join imminently. We have reached a great stage in negotiations, but, as he will have heard in answer to questions from across the House, trade negotiations are not easy and we need to make sure we protect UK food standards. There is a lot we are doing, and I think we will have some good news for him in due course.

T9. [904291] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's visit to Mexico last month. If she had the chance to do some shopping, she may know that the largest chain of department stores in Mexico is called Liverpool, founded in 1847 and named after my home city and port for all the merchandise that was shipped through it. There is huge potential for infrastructure building in Mexico, including in clean technology. What is her Department doing to link UK industry to those opportunities and that potential in Mexico?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am afraid I did not have any time whatever during that trip to do any shopping. It was all about the UK-Mexico free trade agreement, which will do exactly what he wants. The negotiations are ongoing and continue to reflect the shared ambition for an agreement that is both modern and comprehensive. We talked in particular about services and investment in digital. We are aligned in the green chapters and in areas such as small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation and trade, and on gender equality.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What discussions have the Government had to secure further memorandums of understanding with individual US states? When visiting Nebraska last year, I spoke to the Governor of that state. There is huge enthusiasm, especially among Republican-led states, to strike further deals, so it would be brilliant if we could get some of them over the line.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend, because while the US may not be interested in a free trade deal at the moment, we are working with individual states to develop memorandums of understanding. We have already

concluded them with Indiana, North Carolina and South Carolina, and are in discussions with California, Texas, Utah and Oklahoma. We are open to further discussions, because there is huge opportunity of mutual interest.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Can the Minister explain how the UK can maintain a close and historic friendship with Israel during the current difficulties? Can he let us know what the Prime Minister will do, when he meets the Israeli Prime Minister this weekend, to challenge the sale of goods produced in illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Nigel Huddleston: I refer the hon. Lady to my answer earlier on part of that question. With our friends and allies, including who we trade with, we raise issues and concerns of interest to our constituents and to the British Government on an ongoing basis, not just in trade and business discussions but through other channels and Government Departments. We are happy to have robust conversations with our friends.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Unlike other alcohol producers, the Scotch Whisky Association and industry are having to put up with a 10% increase in duty, making the cost of whisky 75% tax. Spirits are effectively excluded from the draught support scheme, and distilleries cannot access the energy-intensive industries support that other alcohol producers can. When will we get a level playing field for the Scottish whisky industry?

Kemi Badenoch: This Government value and support the Scotch whisky industry. Just last year, we helped to liberalise tariffs on Scotch whisky in the USA. My Department and I are in continual discussions with the Scotch Whisky Association and industry to see what we can do to support them.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The retail sector is a hugely important part of our economy and a huge employer in my constituency. What are the Government doing to support it in difficult times?

Kevin Hollinrake: The retail sector is benefiting from the £13.6 billion of business rates support and the 75% discount up to £110,000 per premises. These are difficult times for many businesses, not least retail, but we are keen to ensure that we end up on a fair and level playing field. Also, businesses will benefit from the economic turnaround that we expect later this year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of just how much wonderful research is going on in our universities in medical technology, environmental technology and all the rest? Will she do something to make our universities more entrepreneurial? Some are lagging in their expertise. What can we do to make universities partner with business to make them more entrepreneurial?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman is right that we want universities to become more entrepreneurial. We had fantastic work at Oxford University with AstraZeneca. Many of them are doing quite well. I am keen to hear his suggestions of what I can do to encourage universities. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and

Technology is working on this issue, but from a business perspective, we want to ensure that we are continuing to facilitate relationships with both businesses and universities, especially in clusters where universities are essential to the local economy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Why is the Secretary of State perpetuating the myth that the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is a good thing, necessary or going to receive Royal Assent in anything like the shape in which it was first presented to this House? What is the target date for Royal Assent? Should she not prepare now to drop the thing entirely?

Kemi Badenoch: No.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Further to the negotiations for a free trade agreement with India, can the Minister perhaps update the House on the impact of the closure of the internet in the state of Punjab over the last week, and the reduction in freedom of expression for the majority of the Sikh population of that state?

Nigel Huddleston: As I mentioned in answer to a previous question, when it comes to other issues, including human rights and freedom of the press, these are conversations we also have with our friends and colleagues around the world. We cannot deal with all these issues with free trade agreements.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The United Arab Emirates recently warned Ministers against raising concerns about human rights issues in Gulf Co-operation Council countries if we want to negotiate strong trade deals. That goes completely against our trade principles. Can Ministers confirm that they will not be held to ransom and will not sign trade agreements where human rights are a key concern?

Kemi Badenoch: In everything we do, we ensure that we continue to promote and assert British values. That includes within the trade agreements that we are signing with all countries.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You have called me, and I have a question ready-made here, Mr Speaker. Like on “Blue Peter”, here is one I prepared earlier.

Only yesterday, the Secretary of State signed a trade deal with the Ukrainian First Minister to provide pivotal support to the Ukrainian economy. Has the Secretary of State assessed how soon that will impact Ukraine in helping it—*[Interruption]*—lay the foundation for revival?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid I missed the end of the hon. Member’s question but I am happy to write to him in response.

Food Price Inflation

10.34 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on food price inflation.

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): I will respond on behalf of the Secretary of State. I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We recognise that food prices have gone up. The recent increase in food price inflation was driven by upward price movements in eight of the 11 food categories. The three most significant price increases since February 2022 are oils and fats, at 32.1%; milk, cheese and eggs, at 30.8%; and non-classified food products, at 28.9%. While recent unseasonable weather in Morocco has also created some temporary supply disruption to fruit and vegetables, domestic retailers have held prices comparatively low compared with the rest of Europe, where increased demand led to some cases of 300% rises in the price of some vegetables.

A number of media outlets have reported that the recent shortage of some salad and vegetables has been the driver for the increase in food inflation in February, but that is not the case. The overall inflation rate increases have been caused by several factors. There are other categories where price increases have been greater than that of vegetables over the past year.

These high overall inflation rates are driven by high utility prices and pressures on global supply chains that are being felt across Europe and beyond. Commentators expect the rate of inflation both across the economy and for food and drink to be near its peak. The Government have put in place a number of measures to support households with prices, including committing £37 billion to support households with the cost of living; £1 billion of that has already gone towards help with the cost of household essentials.

Looking forward to April, the Government will be uprating benefit rates and state pensions by 10.1%. The benefit cap levels will also be increasing by the same amount in order to increase the number of households that can benefit from those uprating decisions. In addition, for 2023-24, households on eligible means-tested benefits will get up to £900 in cost of living payments. That will be split into three payments of around £300 each across the 2023-24 financial year. A separate £300 payment will be made to pensioner households on top of their winter fuel payments, and individuals in receipt of eligible disability benefits will receive a £150 payment.

Free school meal eligibility is being permanently extended to children from all families with no recourse to public funds. The Government have extended free school meals to more groups of children than any other Government over the past half century. We remain committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children continue to be supported.

We are also working closely with retailers to explore the range of measures they can take to ensure the availability and affordability of food, so while we recognise that this is a challenging time for consumers, we are taking a large number of steps to support people with

the cost of living and I have great faith in the food supply chain, which has proven itself to be extremely resilient over the past few years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister of State for his response, but this is a cost of living crisis driven in large part by the cost of food, so where is the Secretary of State? She seems to spend more time in the departure lounge than in her own Department at times. Mr Speaker, I feel like I am shadowing a shadow. Where is the Secretary of State on the most important issue at this point in her brief?

Once again, we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, in which food inflation is playing a large part. If inflation overall is not curbed, the danger is that that will have an impact on the ability of people to pay their mortgages and we could see further interest rate rises as a result. There are serious questions about the Government's approach to the cost of food and our food security. Some producers are reducing production and some are exiting completely. There are now 7,000 fewer food producers in agriculture than in 2019. Food inflation is up 18.2%, which is the highest in 45 years, and import costs to February are up 12.7%. The Minister knows—he is in the business—that those import costs today will be felt for months to come.

There has been warning after warning. Thanks to you, Mr Speaker, this is the second urgent question on food security, but where are the Government on farming payments, on labour shortages, on energy costs, on the costs of feed and fertiliser and on the impact of avian flu? Last time the Secretary of State was here, her advice to the nation was a call to arms to go out and buy turnips—those were her words of wisdom. That just does not wash. When will the Government realise that this is a crisis of their making and they need to take action now?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and statements—there were not many questions in there. I can tell him that the Government wholly recognise the challenge that inflation brings to the economy. That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer has set out a number of measures to curb inflation and to manage the economy in a way that he will struggle to understand.

I would also say that huge pressures in the global economy, following Putin's invasion of Ukraine on the back of a global pandemic, are being felt all around the world. Global energy prices have driven huge spikes, for example in the cost of fertiliser, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned: ammonium nitrate went from circa £250 a tonne to in excess of £1,000 a tonne for a short period. The good news is that global gas prices are easing back and coming back under control into a more affordable price range. That will take time to feed through to some of the cost pressures that are being put on our primary producers, but the Government are continuing to talk—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the hon. Gentleman mentions labour. That is why the Government increased the number of seasonal agricultural worker visas to 45,000.

Jim McMahon: We need 90,000.

Mark Spencer: So the hon. Gentleman says, but there are an extra 10,000 visas available should the industry request it and require it. That request has not come to the Government, because we still have enough people in the supply chain with the 45,000 visas that are available. We continue to work and co-operate with retailers, processors and the food sector on continuing to supply good-quality food to our consumers.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Yesterday's inflation numbers were a sobering reminder of how terrible a tax inflation is on our economy. It is a tax that harms everyone, but it harms the poorest most. Does the Minister agree that, while Government fiscal policy this year needs to help in terms of halving inflation, the primary responsibility for getting inflation under control has been set in a remit letter given to the independent Bank of England? It is the Bank's job to make sure that inflation gets back in its box.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work chairing the Treasury Committee and holding the Treasury to account. She will be aware that the Prime Minister's priority is to get inflation back under control and get it down. We will continue to work across Government to make sure that that happens, and we do recognise the challenge that this brings to consumers and to our constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on securing this urgent question. The cost of living crisis remains the SNP's top priority, alongside tackling energy bills. This Government talk about halving inflation, but just yesterday it went up again to 10.4%, and we know that at lunchtime the Bank of England will hike interest rates up to reflect that.

All this, I am afraid, puts pressure on household budgets, which are under enormous strain already. Stats from the Office for National Statistics show that food price inflation runs at 18.2%. The poorest tenth of households experience an even higher rate of inflation, according to the Resolution Foundation. A number of adults are buying less food at the supermarket; worryingly, we are hearing of mothers diluting formula with water just to try and get by. Does the Minister agree that we therefore need to look at the essentials guarantee proposed by the likes of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust: £120 a week for single people and £200 for couples? If the Government will not do that, will they just get out of the way and let an independent Scotland get involved so that we can actually tackle food poverty and make sure that people can live in dignity?

Mark Spencer: I think being able to ride the challenges and operate on an international basis as a United Kingdom is actually a very good example of our being genuinely better off together. However, we recognise that the spike in food prices is a challenge for consumers, particularly the people on lower incomes whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned. That is why the Chancellor has introduced a £37 billion package to support those people, including pensioners, and that is why they will receive regular £300 payments over the next few years, with continued support from the Government to try to mitigate the impact of these prices.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Let me first draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Before the recent rises in energy and fuel costs, the UK had the most affordable food prices in its history and was considered to have the third most affordable food prices in the world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Chancellor made exactly the right decision in continuing to freeze fuel duty, and that that will be extremely welcome both to food producers and to the food processing industry?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that we have benefited from very low food prices for a number of decades, because of the robust systems that we have in place for retailers and producers of high-quality food. He is also right to recognise that fuel costs are a huge driver of inflation if they are allowed to rise dramatically. That is why the Chancellor has maintained that support, and I am glad that he will continue to do so in the future.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Rising food price inflation is terrifying for many families, none more so than those who are already struggling with the cost of living crisis. I speak to numerous families in my constituency who are having to use food banks although in many cases both partners are in full-time employment. That is truly shocking, and such an indictment of Tory Britain in 2023. The Government are clearly not doing enough, so may I ask the Minister what more they can do to help manufacturers and suppliers to bring costs down and make food more affordable once again?

Mark Spencer: We continue to have regular meetings with the processing and hospitality sectors and with retailers to ensure that there is co-operation throughout the food supply chains. There has to be fairness in those supply chains so that risk and reward are shared equally among primary producers, retailers and processors. I think that that co-operation will continue, and the Government are always available to try to co-ordinate these discussions to ensure that we have most effective food supply chains possible.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government's measures to assist people with cost of living pressures are among the most generous in Europe, and includes their paying roughly a third of people's energy bills, but this news on food price inflation is really worrying. Can the Minister assure us that the Government are on track to deliver the Prime Minister's promise to halve inflation by the end of the year?

Mark Spencer: We continue to monitor inflation, and the Prime Minister's ambition is to reduce it. Food prices have driven that inflationary figure over the last month, but the good news is that we are starting to see signs that it is at its peak, and already some of the driving factors such as the wholesale prices of gas, fertiliser and imports are beginning to ease back.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I think that all of us, as constituency Members, are dealing with an increasing amount of casework relating to the

[Wendy Chamberlain]

cost of living. Yesterday the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks, which I co-chair, published its first report, “Cash or Food?”, which I commend to all Members. Sadly, no one from the Government was able to attend the launch, so will the Minister agree to meet me and discuss its findings?

Mark Spencer: It is always a pleasure to meet the hon. Lady. She did text me to draw my attention to the event, but my diary did not allow me to attend. However, I will of course be happy to read her report and to meet her at some point in the future.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Government’s short-term measures are of course welcome, but we also need a long-term food security plan to encourage farmers to grow more and to ensure that more of our food is produced in this country rather than our relying on expensive imports. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that that long-term plan is implemented?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend has asked an important question. This applies to energy production as well as food production, which is why we are moving away from the common agricultural policy to environmental land management schemes that will help farmers not only to produce great food, but to have a positive impact on our environment and our biodiversity.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Exchequer may be trying to convince us that he has the economy, and inflation along with it, under control, but food prices show us what is happening to the lives of people in our constituencies. The price of full-fat milk has increased by 42%, the price of low-fat milk by 34%, the price of eggs by 32%, and the price of bread by 21%. These are staple foods that people have to buy. Why is the UK so far out of step with other countries, with such huge food price inflation?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right that we are not in step with our European colleagues, who have seen 300% rises in some fruit and vegetable prices. We are way below those sorts of spikes. If we compare food prices across Europe, we see that the UK is very well placed. That is because we have a very robust food supply chain. However, I accept that the fact that it is harder elsewhere is of little consequence to our constituents. We recognise the challenge they face. That is why we have introduced a huge package of support for people with their household bills.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Obviously, inflation is about supply and demand. I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that having more domestic production will help our food security. It was worrying to hear that food producers—I am thinking of midlands tomato growers—switched off their electricity instead of planting and having an early season, because of the cost. They said that it did not pay for them to grow an early crop. How can the Department help to enable producers to produce more? This is a question of the cost of electricity, but it is also about ensuring that we have that supply.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work in this area; I know that she is a big campaigner on food security and the cost of food, particularly for her constituents. Again, we are working with the sector to try to help and support those who produce food in greenhouses. I recently had the privilege of visiting Thanet Earth in Kent, which is producing cucumbers, tomatoes and peppers for the UK market, linked to an energy supply plant from which it gets free heat and carbon dioxide to help with that process. There are opportunities to do that in the UK. Traditionally, in January and February we have procured tomatoes and cucumbers from north Africa and southern Europe, because the climate is much warmer there. Unfortunately, Morocco and southern Spain suffered a snow event, which led to some challenges in the supply chain.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Food prices have risen by over 18% in the past year. For people in my constituency on low wages, the underlying crisis being caused by that and, of course, the hidden cost of basic foodstuffs rising by two or three times that amount, is crushing. Contrary to what the Minister said, the London School of Economics put the price increases at the door of Brexit. Will he apologise for his Government’s actions and allow my constituents the same access to the single market as those in Northern Ireland?

Mark Spencer: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard earlier, food inflation is higher in Europe than in the UK for some products. He may well want to join back with his friends in Europe, but we have the very best and most robust supply chains. Brexit makes very little difference to that trading relationship. We are still importing products from our friends in Europe, as well as other parts of the world, and we are supporting UK producers to produce great food here, too.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Public sector procurement will play a significant role in ensuring an affordable, healthy and sustainable supply chain. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs consulted on that last year; the consultation finished on 4 September, and apparently there were 126 responses. I have to keep checking that the consultation really did exist, because whenever I ask Ministers about it, they do not seem to know. Labour has adopted one of its policies, about 50% of food being locally sourced and sustainable. When are we going to hear from the Government whether they will do the same?

Mark Spencer: We are very keen to use the power of government to procure top-quality, UK-produced food. As the hon. Lady identifies, we made a commitment to try to get to 50% as soon as possible. We remain committed to encouraging UK Government Departments to procure great British food, which is one tool the Government are using.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Both Chelwood Foodbank Plus and Stockport food bank support people in my constituency, and I am grateful to them. The Trussell Trust network has had to distribute more than 7,000 emergency food parcels each day this winter. Is the Minister proud of his Government’s record on food poverty?

Mark Spencer: The number of households in absolute poverty has actually gone down since the Government came to power, but I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the people working in Stockport's food banks. We recognise the challenge that consumers are currently facing, particularly those on low incomes, which is why the Chancellor was so supportive in introducing a huge package—£37 billion—to help households get through this crisis.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): When the current Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, she said, in a memorable televised Select Committee exchange with me, that the responsibility for food poverty lies with DEFRA. I note that she is not here. Does the Minister believe that these food price inflation figures will result in more people using food banks, and that the best way to end food bank use is to support the affordable food networks of Good Food Scotland and Feeding Britain? Will he meet them and me to discuss how we can support affordable food projects?

Mark Spencer: We should be clear that I am the Minister with responsibility for food, which is why I am here to answer this urgent question. We take this challenge very seriously, and we continue to work with other Departments to try to help households cope with food price increases. As I said earlier, the good news is that we are seeing signs that this is the peak of food price inflation. There are signs that global gas prices, fertiliser prices and import costs are starting to reduce.

Mr Speaker: I call Kim Johnson.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I have forgotten my question!

Mr Speaker: In that case, I call Barry Sheerman, who always has a question.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know the Minister to be an honest chap, so will he stop making excuses, whether it is Putin or snow, and wake up to the fact that the food bank network is crumbling? The network cannot cope with demand, and it cannot get the supply. Its volunteers across the country are stressed out by the pressure. When will he do something? Perhaps all the money raised by the plastic bag charge could flow not into the supermarkets' back pockets but into the food banks.

Mark Spencer: The Government have a responsibility to deal with the facts as they are presented. It is a statement of fact that Ukraine was a huge producer of food within Europe. It is a statement of fact that Putin's illegal invasion caused global gas prices to go up exponentially, and even the hon. Gentleman would recognise that that has had a huge impact.

The hon. Gentleman suggests that the retailers are creaming off huge profits on the back of the plastic bag tax, but the margin on their profits is actually around 1% or 2%. We continue to work with retailers and the processing sector to make sure there is fairness in the supply chain, so that the risk and reward are shared. UK retailers are doing a very good job of keeping us well supplied and of suppressing prices as much as possible in comparison with our European colleagues.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Our constituents who use first-stage infant formula with their babies are experiencing soaring costs, and those who are unable to afford these increased prices are watering down the formula to make it last. Such products should be treated with the utmost caution, as unsuitable alternatives can damage the health of babies. What does the Minister have to say to families in our constituencies who are not able to afford infant formula for their babies? What action will he take to ensure these products are affordable and available to all?

Mark Spencer: I recognise how challenging that situation must be. That is why the Government are putting in huge support packages to try to help households cope with the increase in energy and food prices. We will continue to look after the most vulnerable people in society, offering them support to help them through this challenging time.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Many food and drink businesses express their frustrations to me, as Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, about the lack of co-ordination between the Minister's Department and BEIS. Given the influence of inflation, the challenges in the labour market, and the need for technology adoption and automation in the sector, is it not time for a proper, co-ordinated sector deal between BEIS, the Department for International Trade and the Minister's Department for the food and drink industry?

Mark Spencer: We do, of course, talk to our colleagues across government, and we also invest a huge amount in technology to help develop new technologies to reduce the price of food production. We are running competitions to encourage robotics and computerised systems to help in the processing sector. We have also introduced the gene editing Bill—the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill—which I hope will reach Royal Assent very soon. It will help the industry to develop new technologies to reduce the cost of food production.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I grew up in West Dunbartonshire in the 1970s and 1980s, when the legacy of de-industrialisation was compounded by recession after recession, weak economic growth became the norm and well-paid, skilled jobs were replaced with minimum wage service industry jobs, creating a vicious circle that seems difficult to escape. Will the Minister advise my constituents, and similar constituents across these islands, who are living close to the breadline what the Government are doing for them, as Brexit Britain has brought about this 1970s food inflation?

Mark Spencer: There is a fundamental difference between today and the 1970s: employment is at a very high level and lots of jobs are available to people. But that does not mitigate the challenge that some constituents are finding themselves in. That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer has introduced this huge package of support to try to help people with that cost of living challenge they face.

Mr Speaker: I call Kim Johnson.

Kim Johnson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me a second opportunity. The Minister mentioned the number of children accessing free school meals. We have nearly 4 million children living in poverty, so will he explain what assessment he has undertaken of the impact of food price inflation on the delivery of school meals, given that schools receive only £2.41 per pupil and that has increased by only 7p in the past 13 years?

Mark Spencer: We are supporting more children now than at any point in history. We continue to offer them that support and we will carry on doing that. School meals are the responsibility of the Department for Education, but we consistently have conversations with our friends across government to make sure that we are co-operating and co-ordinating our approach.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): There are 10 food pantries across my constituency supplying the surplus food from the various main supermarkets for between £5 and £10 per bag. The demand is so great that the volunteers cannot keep up with people doing their weekly shops at these pantries. We now face a new challenge: FareShare, which co-ordinates the surplus food, is running out of surplus food. What is the Minister going to do to start dealing with the huge problem of constituents paying for a week's food of whatever they can find for £10, which is almost past its sell-by date, but the suppliers are running out? When is he going to get a grip and start dealing with the issues of food poverty in this country?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the great support our retailers are giving to those people who face that challenge; they continue to work with charities in that sector to help supply food to the most vulnerable. Of course, the Government also play their part with a huge package of support, helping people through this challenge.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My concern is here and now: the food banks in York are running out of food because demand is going through the roof and people cannot afford to make the donations that they were. For my part, I am having a food drive on 31 March and 1 April for our city to donate. What is the Minister doing on his part? Will he make grants available to food banks so that they can actually afford to feed our city?

Mark Spencer: We continue to work with the whole sector, including retailers, manufacturers and primary producers, to maintain the most robust food supply chain. I pay tribute to the work that food banks do in the hon. Lady's constituency to support the most vulnerable; that is what we are doing too, as a Government, by supporting people with the cost of their household bills.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Our farmers were promised by the Conservative Government that the support that they received from the EU would be replaced in full after the UK left the EU. Instead, their subsidies are being phased out; there will be a basic payment cut of 20% this year. On top of that, in April, farmers' energy bill support will be cut by up to 85%. Given those 2016 Government promises to farmers,

will the Minister commit to stopping the phasing out of support payments until the new environmental land management schemes are fully rolled out, so that we can bring down food prices?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are moving to a new phase—away from the common agricultural policy and towards environmental land management schemes. If we listened to him and his party, and agreed to motions that they have tabled in this place and the other place, we would cut off farmers' access, up and down this country, to the environmental land management schemes, which also cover countryside stewardship. The fatal motion his party has tabled in the other place would crash the rural economy, and destroy the opportunity for farmers to move to a new system and improve our environmental impact.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Food retailers report that food packaging is a key area in which costs have risen significantly. That contributes to higher prices in shops. What conversations have there been about supporting businesses in reducing packaging, or sourcing more affordable materials?

Mark Spencer: There have been many conversations, both across Government and with producers, manufacturers and retailers, on reducing the amount of plastic packaging that we release into the environment, and on making packaging more reusable and recyclable, and less costly to the consumer.

Mr Speaker: As it is his birthday on Saturday, and given the worries about the price of birthday cakes, we had better hear from Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am still a young person at heart. I thank the Minister very much for his responses. He understands the issues well. He and the Government are doing their best. I hail from a constituency that grows the best potatoes: Comber potatoes. Everyone knows that they are the best in the UK, and indeed the world. My constituency ships ready-to-eat mash and other veg throughout the United Kingdom. The potential is there for us to be self-sustaining. Will the Minister outline how he intends to support the farming industry, so that it can make more British produce to sell in the internal market, which will lower the price of staple foods? That, in turn, will lower inflation for all.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and for his interest in this area. I hope he recognises that we are self-sufficient in lamb; we are very close to being self-sufficient in beef; and we are more than 100% self-sufficient in liquid milk. The UK has a very good supply chain and top-quality producers. The good news, which I hope he will join me in celebrating, is that the Windsor framework now allows Northern Irish farmers to plant Scottish seed potatoes without interference. That is good news for the United Kingdom, for Scottish seed producers, and for Northern Ireland's potato growers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

11.8 am

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on talks to de-escalate the violence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The UK is intensely focused on, and concerned by, the increasing violence on the west bank. The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Israeli counterpart, Eli Cohen, on Tuesday to emphasise the importance of Israeli de-escalation ahead of the convergence of Easter, Passover and Ramadan. As the Foreign Secretary set out to this House on 14 March, he has also urged the Palestinian leadership to take steps to avoid a cycle of violence. While the security situation remains fragile, I welcome Israeli and Palestinian engagement in the meetings in Aqaba on 26 February and Sharm el-Sheikh on 19 March. It is critical that both parties abide by the commitments made there publicly and take forward the confidence-building measures that they have promised.

The UK wants to see three steps that would demonstrate commitment to de-escalating the worrying situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. First, the Palestinian Authority must resume security co-operation with Israel, fight against terror and incitement of violence, and improve the security situation in area A of the west bank. Too many Israelis have been killed in terror attacks in Israel and the west bank this year. Such targeted attacks against civilians are unlawful, unjustifiable and repugnant.

Secondly, Israel must do more to tackle unacceptable settler violence such as that perpetrated against innocent Palestinians in Huwara. The UK has consistently urged Israeli security forces to provide appropriate protection to the Palestinian civilian population, bring to justice perpetrators of settler violence and end the culture of impunity. The UK condemned the Israeli Finance Minister's comments calling for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be "wiped out" and his recent comments that deny the existence of the Palestinian people, their right to self-determination and their history and culture.

Thirdly, Israel must also cease its unilateral steps that push parties further from dialogue and reduce the possibility of meaningful negotiations. Those steps include stopping approval of settlements, legalisation of outposts and evictions of Palestinians in occupied territory, particularly in east Jerusalem. The Foreign Secretary raised our concerns about the speculation of settlement building on the El site in the OPTs and we are pleased that there has now been a moratorium on that expansion. However, we are deeply concerned at the recent repeal of the 2005 Disengagement Plan Implementation Law by the Knesset. That decision is another unilateral measure that damages any renewed efforts at de-escalation and risks further undermining a two-state solution.

All Israelis and Palestinians deserve peace and security, not just through the upcoming festivals of Easter, Passover and Ramadan this spring, but for the long term. That will require political will, good faith, strong co-operation

and meaningful actions by both Israelis and Palestinians. The UK remains resolute in its commitment to a two-state solution based on 1967 lines.

Ms Qaisar: I pay my respects to both Palestinians and Israelis who have been killed in recent violence. Ramadan Mubarak; today marks the start of Ramadan and I, like many Muslims, am fasting. Yet Muslims and those of other faiths or no faith in the occupied Palestinian territories have seen a significant increase in human rights violations perpetrated by Israeli authorities.

More than 1,000 Palestinians are at imminent risk of forcible transfer from Masafer Yatta, an action that would amount to a war crime. The situation is rapidly deteriorating and Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, lands in the UK today on a state visit. During talks, the UK Government must call for a de-escalation of violence.

Amnesty International concluded last year that Israel is

"committing the crime of apartheid against Palestinians."

Will the UK Government raise those concerns with the Prime Minister? The Finance Minister recently stated:

"There is no such thing as a Palestinian people",

and said he wanted to see the Palestinian village of Huwara wiped off the map. Will the Minister put on record her disgust at that type of language?

The Israeli Government continue to push for the development of illegal settlements, despite promising not to do so. If that construction does not stop, will the UK Government commit to suspending trade deal talks with Israeli counterparts until we can ensure human rights are safeguarded?

The UK Government must acknowledge the systematic and calculated discrimination against Palestinians in occupied territories carried out by the Israeli military and authorities. Will the Government finally halt their approval of the sale of arms to Israel and support the need for an independent investigation by the International Criminal Court into human rights violations?

We are approaching the one-year anniversary of the murder of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. Al Jazeera has escalated her killing to the ICC after the Israeli defence force refused to investigate her killing and former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid said:

"No one will investigate IDF soldiers and no one will preach to us about morals in warfare".

Do the Government accept that, unless they urgently support the ICC investigation, they are turning a blind eye to blatant military impunity for murdering Palestinians?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am happy to repeat that the UK condemned the Israeli Finance Minister's comments calling for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be wiped out, and his recent comments denying the existence of the Palestinian people. We have condemned that absolutely, and I think that has been heard clearly.

Prime Minister Netanyahu will visit the UK tomorrow, and has asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister. He will have a short meeting with the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. I know that the Prime Minister will raise the issues that concern us—as all good, trusted friends and partners do. We are confident and always do so with all our partners, including Israel.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

The hon. Lady mentioned the anniversary of the death of respected Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. It seems extraordinary that we are already a year on. The UK is committed to working with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to advance that peaceful two-state solution. We voted no on the resolution pertaining to referral to the ICC because we consider that is not helpful to bringing the parties back to dialogue.¹ As I set out in my answer to the urgent question, we continue to work with all parties to help find a way forward. We hope that the continuing role of talks will help to move that forward.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In recent weeks, three of the many terrorist attacks that have occurred in Israel were committed by children under 15—two stabbings and one shooting. I ask the Government to urge the Palestinian Authority to do more to tackle that toxic culture of radicalisation and anti-Israel hatred, which is leading to the exploitation and radicalisation of children, and to their involvement in terrorist attacks.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend highlights one of the most distressing aspects of the continued violence and despair between both countries. We continue to work with all parties, as I have set out, to try to reduce the level of violence. I have no doubt that the Prime Minister will raise that in his meetings tomorrow and ask parties to continue to take urgent measures to reduce tensions, de-escalate the situation and, indeed, end that deadly cycle of violence. Of course, that includes supporting them in trying to keep children away from that radicalisation position.

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

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Labour party stands for international law, human rights and a negotiated peace based on a two-state solution, with a safe and secure Israel alongside a sovereign Palestinian state.

At the last elections, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went into coalition with the far right and, under that new Government, an already fragile situation has worsened. His promotion of extremists Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich has put ultra-nationalism in key positions of the Israeli Government. I am sure that the whole House will have been appalled by Smotrich's remarks in Paris this weekend, when he denied the very existence of the Palestinian people and their culture.

Thus far, 2023 has seen one of the highest death tolls for Palestinians and Israelis in a long time, with more than 80 Palestinians and 14 Israelis killed this year. There has been a renewed assault on the rights of Palestinians, a ramping up of inflammatory rhetoric, and dangerous new moves to try to legitimise illegal settlements, threatening the viability of a two-state solution. Israel has suffered from terrorist attacks and a new militant threat, and the Israeli Government are also taking steps that threaten to undermine Israel's democracy. President Netanyahu's attempts to undermine judicial independence and dispense with equality laws for the LGBT+ community are sowing division and deep unease. The weekly mass protests in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem demonstrate that Israeli society is now also deeply divided.

What is the Minister's assessment of the impact of what many in Israel see as fundamental attacks on their precious democracy? The Prime Minister has, in his meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu tomorrow, an opportunity to use Britain's close relationship with Israel to take a clear stance on human rights, respect for international law and commitment to democracy. I am deeply concerned that the recently signed road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations dilutes long-standing UK positions, held by successive Governments, in relation to international law. The road map makes no mention of supporting a two-state solution, and it implies that settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories could be treated as part of Israel for the purposes of trade. Can the Minister tell the House whether the road map amounts to a change in policy, will she reiterate that the Government still support a two-state solution, and will she make it clear that the UK deplores the current escalation of violence?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is always encouraging to hear both sides of the House agree that the UK's position on the middle east process finding a resolution is that we want to see a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living side by side with a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. That remains a clear position and has not changed.

The road map that the Foreign Secretary signed with his counterpart earlier in the week in London fulfils the commitments that were made in the November 2021 memorandum of understanding on strengthening co-operation across a range of relationships around our economic, security and technology ties and, importantly, advancing our co-operation on environmental and climate change issues, and leveraging our combined strengths in that area to address some of the global health challenges. It also contains provisions on the importance of regional co-operation in working together to expand the historic Abraham accords. That is a series of practical issues that we will work upon together with our Israeli friends, but it does not in any way change the UK's position—it is good to hear the shadow Minister set out the same—on the agreed settlement that we continue to support.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Polling conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research showed that 72% of all Palestinians supported the formation of armed terror groups such as the Lions' Den. These groups have been behind more than 1,000 terror incidents over the last year and are facilitated with Iranian and Hezbollah financial and military support. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern at the emergence of these groups, the high level of support they are receiving and the Palestinian Authority's apparent loss of control over so much of the west bank to these terror groups?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I reiterate that we absolutely condemn violence from all sides, and we want to ensure that we help the Palestinian Authority to improve their security through the work of the British support team in Ramallah, whom I had the privilege to visit last year on my visit to the OPTs, along with the many networks that we are helping to strengthen and stabilise their own

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

communities. We remain resolute in our commitment to Israel's security, and we condemn Hamas's use of indiscriminate and abhorrent rocket attacks. We want to continue to provide support and the strong, clear message that every Israeli and every Palestinian has the right to live in peace and security.

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

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on securing this urgent question. Clearly, settlement expansion is a major issue in the violence that is continuing to break out. This week, the Israeli Parliament voted to allow Israeli citizens to occupy four sites in the west bank evacuated in the 2005 disengagement. The High Court of Justice has already classified this as private Palestinian land. Clearly, the moratorium that the Minister mentioned is not being respected here.

We know that this is not a simple situation, but there are some simple steps that we can take here to make a difference. Will the Minister support the UK banning trade in Israeli settlement goods? Will she include the UK Government's own stated position that these settlements are illegal in any and all agreements with Israel and provide for consequences for breach of that? Will she also carry that forward into forthcoming trade deal discussions? Will she stop the export of equipment and arms proven to be repeatedly used in settlement expansion, and will she do it now?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK's position on settlements is clear: settlements are illegal under international law and call into question Israel's commitment to the two-state solution. We have urged Israel to halt its settlement expansion, which we believe threatens the physical viability of a Palestinian state. In February, we and our partners—the US, France, Germany and Italy—set out strong opposition to these unilateral steps. They are contrary to international law, and they undermine the prospects for peace.

In relation to trade matters, our long-established position on settlements is clear: the UK does not recognise the Occupied Palestinian Territories as part of Israel, including illegal settlements. Goods originating from illegal Israeli settlements in the west bank, including East Jerusalem, are not entitled to tariff and trade preferences under either the existing trade agreement between the UK and Israel or, indeed, the agreement between the UK and the Palestinian Authority.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I was really pleased to hear from the Minister that she and the Government continue to support the two-state solution on the former boundaries of 1967. How does she believe that can happen? When I visited recently, the settlements are being built on top of Palestinian houses, and they are insisting on demolitions of Palestinian houses. How can it possibly work?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend raises the concerns that we all have. The voice that we use directly with both our Israeli and our Palestinian friends sets out the continued clear direction that we want to see: de-escalation and, indeed, retrenchment from those illegal

settlements. This continues to be something that is on the agenda whenever we are in talks with them, and I am certain that the Prime Minister will raise those issues tomorrow when Prime Minister Netanyahu is here.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Time after time, we see on social media the crimes against humanity being visited on the Palestinian people. We see it with regularity: homes, houses and schools being destroyed, with bulldozers at the door. Will the Minister understand that this country has a special responsibility and a special place of leverage to make demands? We cannot keep going with the same endless warm words around this conflict. The time has come for this Government to recognise the state of Palestine with immediate effect, and to demand a ban on settlement goods and on the settlements themselves. Will she commit to that?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, the UK Government continue to ask all parties to take urgent measures to reduce those tensions and de-escalate the situation. Because of what the hon. Gentleman has described, we continue to make those statements, and we are engaging closely with all our international partners to try to help end that deadly cycle of violence. We will carry on raising these issues with the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to support co-operation, stability and economic development for the benefit of all their peoples, and we will use the economic tools to help us do that, alongside others. This continues to be at the forefront of the Foreign Secretary's work.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Since January, 14 Israelis have been murdered by Palestinian terrorists, and 80 Palestinians have lost their lives during confrontation with the IDF or in the course of terrorist activities. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of Lions' Den and other terrorist groups, and we have also seen the role of Iran in encouraging those terrorist groups across the world. Will my right hon. Friend review the position on Lions' Den and these other terrorist groups so that they are proscribed in this country, and also finally proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As my hon. Friend is aware, this is a Home Office issue, and as I have said, Prime Minister Netanyahu will be meeting the Home Secretary tomorrow on his visit. We continue to work closely with the Home Office on all these matters, and we will await its view on them.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): As the Minister has said, the settlements on the west bank are illegal and they undermine the possibility of a two-state solution, so will the Government make it absolutely clear to Benjamin Netanyahu that any attempt to annex the west bank is totally and unequivocally unacceptable?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, the UK's position on settlements is absolutely clear. Settlements are illegal under international law and they call into question Israel's commitment to a two-state solution. We continue to raise the issue with our Israeli counterparts and to condemn settler violence in order that de-escalation provides the opportunity for peace talks to progress.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The historic Abraham accords prove once and for all that peace between Israel and her Arab neighbours is not only possible, but can quickly bring remarkable and positive change to the region. Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating the accords, and does she agree that Palestinian leaders would be best served by embracing their spirit and joining Israel at the negotiating table as soon as possible?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Abraham accords have provided an opportunity to move forward, and we were pleased to see progress at the Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh meetings earlier in the year, and we continue to support and encourage all sides to continue that process. This is difficult—we understand that—and we stand ready to support all to ensure that a two-state solution is the one that we reach.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): This week, a ban was lifted to allow Israeli citizens back into the sites of four settlements in the occupied west bank. The UK must stand firm against any steps towards annexation. What concerns has the Minister raised about the legality of settlement expansion under international law and its impact on the viability of a two-state solution? Will further calls for action be made by the Government when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits the UK?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The United Kingdom is opposed to the unilateral annexation of all or any part of the west bank. Such a move would be contrary to international law and damaging to peace efforts, and it could not pass unchallenged. We are committed to working with all parties to maintain calm and avoid provocation, and we are absolutely clear that demolitions and forced evictions are contrary to international humanitarian law.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I call the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Since the start of this year, as we have already heard, 15 Israelis have been killed and 70 injured in Palestinian terror attacks, with stabbings, shootings and bombings targeting innocent people. What steps is our Government taking to support Israel in combating terrorism?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We are appalled by the multiple terror attacks that have killed and injured Israelis and, indeed, Palestinian civilians in the early part of this year. While Israel has a legitimate right to defend itself, it is important that Israeli forces exercise maximum restraint, especially in the use of live fire, when protecting legitimate security interests. We are continuing to work, asking all parties to take urgent measures to reduce tensions in order to de-escalate this situation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister will be aware of the remarks of the Finance Minister, Bezalet Smotrich, saying that the Palestinian village of Huwara should be wiped out. She will also be aware that he has said:

“There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.”

Denying the existence of a people and calling for villages to be wiped out takes the level of rhetoric to a new level of unacceptability. With people like that now at the

heart of the Netanyahu Government, is it not imperative that we do what we can to offer some protection to the Palestinian people by recognising, as a matter of urgency, the Palestinian state?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said before, and I am happy to say again, the UK has condemned the Israeli Finance Minister's comments calling for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be wiped out, and his recent comments that deny the existence of the Palestinian people, as well as their right to self-determination, their history and their culture. That is unacceptable, and we have made that clear, as have all our international partners. We continue to work with all parties, and with the Palestinian Authority, to provide support through the work of the British support team in Ramallah and our diplomatic teams in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, who are actively working on the ground and speaking to and working with their hosts. We are also a strong supporter of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which provides vital services to those in need in Palestinian Authority areas.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): The situation in the region is deeply worrying, yet there is an ever-growing fear about what will happen when Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas leaves the scene after almost two decades in power. Palestinians have borne the brunt of an undemocratic and corrupt Palestinian Authority for years, but the alternatives are likely to be much worse, and terror groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which have been behind much of the recent violence, are likely to attempt to fill the vacuum. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the situation?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We continue to call on Hamas and other terrorist groups to permanently end their incitement and rocket fire against Israel. The Government have assessed that Hamas in its entirety is concerned in terrorism, and in November 2021 we proscribed the organisation in full. We strongly condemn the incitement in the Hamas-run media and education system, which contributes to a culture of hate. As I say, we want to work with the Palestinian Authority and with Palestinians to help them to strengthen their economy and to support their next generation of young people in a successful two-state solution.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The terror attacks on civilians in the Palestinian territories and in Israel have been a very sharp and terrible reminder of the need to build support for peace among the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. Five years ago, the UK Government expressed support for the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, but there has not been much action since. Does the Minister agree that people-to-people co-existence projects between Israelis and Palestinians represent the best opportunity for building consensus around peace while we have a lack of a political process? What more can the Government do?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I agree with the right hon. Lady that relationships are strengthening through economic and academic ties. When I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories last year, I met some wonderful young people developing incredible tech solutions and young business

people with deep education and real enthusiasm for helping their country's economy to grow. Through trade agreements that already exist with Israel, and opportunities with the Palestinian Authority, we are helping those relationships to grow. Alongside that, there is the work, as I have set out, to support peaceful solutions so that those young people have the peace and prosperity they richly deserve.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The tragic escalation of violence that we are witnessing has been stoked by a number of terror actors, including Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, which are actively seeking to sow the seeds of instability in the region. Guns, explosive devices and financial support have all flooded the region in a clear attempt to undermine the democratic state of Israel. What conversations is the Foreign Office having with regional parties about these subversive activities?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have set out, the Foreign Secretary speaks regularly with his counterparts, and our ambassador and teams in-country in both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem work very closely day by day with many actors. We continue to do so, and if my hon. Friend would like a more detailed briefing, I am happy to set that up with the relevant Minister.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Every death in this conflict is a tragedy, so I hope the Minister will disassociate herself from comments from those on her own side who either ignore the deaths of Palestinians or, in relation to Palestinian civilians—including the many children who have been murdered this year—choose to call them “confrontation with the IDF”. That is beyond the pale.

The Minister said that the road map signed this week is out of date, which is candid. It contains no territorial clause, so it opens the way for illegal settlements to be treated as part of green line Israel. Far from raising concerns about the abuse of Palestinian human rights and breaches of international law, it attacks UN bodies for raising those very concerns. Does the Minister accept that this business-as-usual approach legitimises the actions of the extremists in the far-right Israeli Government in relation to both the incitement of violence against the Palestinian civilians and the de jure annexation of the west bank by its transfer to civilian administration?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am afraid I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of colleagues in different parts of the House. I think we all stand firmly together on the policy that those on the Labour Front Bench have highlighted, which is that we all want to see a two-state solution. We want to see Israelis and Palestinians able to live together, side by side, and allow their economies and young people to thrive in a peaceful environment. We continue to work at many levels to support that process, as I have set out. The road map sets out a series of work programmes, where we will work together in support of economic and security ties. We continue to make—as we clearly do this morning—our position known on what we consider to be violence that needs to be de-escalated. We continue, as do our international partners, to make those views clearly known, and we absolutely support the peace talks and the continuing meetings where we are starting to encourage such progress. This is a continuingly difficult situation, and the UK is

clear about what we think is the right outcome. The road map is there to help that work, day to day with citizens, as is the trade agreement with the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to support their economic development.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Will the Minister finally acknowledge, on the Floor of the House, that Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are subjected to mass, calculated discrimination at the hands of Israeli authorities, and will she urgently halt arms trade to Israel?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, we continue to be deeply troubled by the high number of Palestinian civilians killed and injured. The Foreign Secretary has raised that matter recently, and I know the Prime Minister will continue to do so in his meeting tomorrow.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are concerned about the escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians, which has been intensifying since the start of this year. I appreciate and welcome the Minister's commitment to the two-state solution. Illegal settlements and the eviction of Palestinians from their homes causes unnecessary suffering and deaths and calls into question the two-state solution. Will the Minister clarify her comments in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). Will she confirm that the road map—a key document to help outline our commitment—mentions the two-state solution?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, the road map sets out our intention to strengthen co-operation, across our relationship with Israel, around economic, security and technology ties, and to advance co-operation on the environment and climate change. We continue to raise our concerns about the escalating violence, including with our international partners so that the voice of the international community is clearly heard to support a peaceful resolution.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister is aware of the almost daily protests in Israel. On 11 March, half a million people came out on the streets across Israel to protest against the proposed Netanyahu judicial reforms, which will end the independent judiciary because the Government will be able to appoint judges, including to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is the last bastion for many Palestinians. It stopped the evictions at Sheikh Jarrah, it put a gate in the separation wall, and it continues to prosecute cases regarding demolitions and settlement expansion. Will the Prime Minister raise with Prime Minister Netanyahu the fact that an independent judiciary is crucial, and a central pillar of any democracy?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I know the Prime Minister's team will have heard the hon. Gentleman's questions, and I will ensure that they are passed on to No.10 later this afternoon.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I listened closely to the Minister outlining the sad situation in Israel and recognise the wide unrest about the political situation there. Given those circumstances, and the actions of and attitudes expressed by representatives of the Israeli

[*Ian Mearns*]

Government, this cannot be business as usual. Is it time to re-evaluate totally the nature of our intergovernmental relationship with the state of Israel?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we are appalled by the continuing and increasing terror attacks, which are injuring both Israelis and Palestinians. We continue to share our concerns and support those who are working towards a peaceful resolution.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Minister has mentioned repeatedly the need for a de-escalation of violence. However, since the election of the most right-wing Government in Israel's history, human rights violations have increased significantly, including the deaths of innocent children. Settlements in the occupied west bank are illegal, and the eviction of Palestinians from their homes causes unnecessary suffering and calls into question the Israeli Government's commitment to a viable two-state solution. Will the Minister outline how she intends to ensure the Israeli Government abide by their obligations under international law? No warm words—actions speak louder than words.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, the UK Government continue to ask all parties to take urgent measures to reduce tensions and de-escalate. Since the beginning of the year, both the Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad have spoken to many influential international partners working alongside us who have a stake in calming this very difficult situation.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Government this week announced the 2030 road map for UK-Israel relations. However, the Minister has not answered—she has been asked several times—whether she can confirm that the Government consider the road map to effectively distinguish between green line Israel and illegal settlements, as required by UN National Security resolution 2334? Will

the Minister confirm whether the Government undertook any assessment of the road map's compatibility with international law and UN Security Council resolution 2334?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am not the expert on the detail of the road map. I will ask the Foreign Secretary to ensure that details are placed in the House, so that colleagues can see more fully the extensive work done on it and the work it brings together for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her response. Having lived through a time of violence and fear, and raised my children in that environment, I am so thankful my grandchildren do not have the same experience. Will the Minister outline what support we are offering to Israeli and Palestine children to learn a different way: not to hate, but to live in compromise? Will she reiterate that the role of our Government and our Ministers is to facilitate the peace and not take sides, reminding certain factions that the words they use in this place can resonate in Israel and can carry difficulties that are paid in blood? Wise words must be used always.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman is wise. Fortunately, few of us have had his experience. He always speaks with great thoughtfulness on this matter. As one practical example of help, we voted to renew the UN Relief and Works Agency's mandate last year. We remain a proud and important supporter of the agency, which provides essential humanitarian support. For instance, it provides education to over 533,000 children a year, half of them girls, and access to health services to 3.5 million Palestinian refugees. We continue to support it and are working, through the other tools we have, to help sustain it and help people look forward to the opportunities of a peaceful two-state solution, which we will continue to work on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Business of the House

11.49 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 27 March will include:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Consideration in Committee of the Illegal Migration Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 28 MARCH—Consideration in Committee of the Illegal Migration Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 29 MARCH—Second Reading of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

THURSDAY 30 MARCH—General debate on the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

The House will rise for Easter recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 30 March and will return on Monday 17 April.

The provisional business for the week commencing 17 April includes:

MONDAY 17 APRIL—Second Reading of the Data Protection and Digital Information (No.2) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

In his first speech on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister pledged to lead a Government with “accountability at every level”, requiring Ministers to take responsibility for decisions and actions and submit themselves for scrutiny. Does the Leader of the House think that the Prime Minister has kept his promise? I would answer no. We see a constant passing of the buck: “It wasn’t us”; “It was the lawyers’ fault”; “It was the Opposition’s fault”; “It was the civil servants”; “The anti-growth coalition made me crash the economy”; “The blob stopped me stopping the boats”; “The dog ate my homework”. Increasingly ridiculous excuses from the Government. Will the Leader of the House allow MPs to decide whether the Prime Minister has kept his promise, by having a debate on the principle of accountability?

Will the Government take responsibility for the Tory cost of living crisis? Just yesterday, inflation jumped again to 10.4%. Prices have been soaring for months; food has gone up even faster, at 18%. Families are unable to book a holiday or start work on an extension they have been saving up for, and are struggling to pay the bills. Tories blame anyone and anything rather than take responsibility for their 13 years of failure that has led us here.

Will the Tories take responsibility for the small boats crisis? They blame Labour—a party with an actual plan, though not yet in government, to stop channel crossings that are putting lives at risk. But on their watch, last year arrivals reached a new high of 45,000 people, up from just 299 in 2018. Two weeks in a row, the Leader of the House has refused to say when we will see an impact assessment of their latest asylum Bill, to replace the one last year that did not work. Third time lucky: could we have an impact assessment before Committee on Monday? The Minister for Immigration has said that it will be published in “due course”. Where have I heard that before?

It is no good publishing an impact assessment after a Bill has been rushed into law. How is that good lawmaking? How is it a Government allowing scrutiny of their policies? Thankfully, where they failed, the Refugee Council has stepped up and produced an impact assessment. It says that it will cost £9.6 billion just to detain or accommodate people in the first three years of the Bill’s operation. Is that true? Is that what the Government are hiding? Will Ministers take responsibility and publish the impact assessment?

Will Ministers take responsibility for appearing before Select Committees? Why has it been so difficult for the Minister for Women, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), to agree to appear before the Women and Equalities Committee? According to the Committee’s website—I checked—the Minister refused its request to give evidence on menopause in the workplace. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), a Committee member, pointed out that Ministers must prioritise appearances before Committees. It is not an optional extra as she fancies it, or something to squeeze in if there is time in her diary. Could the Leader of the House please remind the Minister of that?

I am afraid that it got worse. We had another round of the Tory blame game, as the Minister took to Twitter, accusing the Committee of being misleading. Could the Leader of the House ask the Minister to take responsibility and apologise to the hard-working Committee Clerks? Is this mess not indicative of the Government’s disregard for women’s health? The next Labour Government will help businesses to support their employees who are going through the menopause. In our new deal for working people, we will require all large employers to submit menopause action plans annually. That is Labour backing working women. What is the Government’s plan?

The Prime Minister’s promise at the start of his premiership was an empty one. The Government are not interested in taking responsibility, not interested in putting themselves or their policies up for scrutiny and not interested in being accountable. They are at the end of the road. No more excuses. No more passing the buck. It is time for a change to a Labour Government, accountable to Parliament and to the British people, with bold, fully funded policies, standing the test of scrutiny. People want to feel better off. They want to be able to see a doctor when they need to, and they want a Prime Minister they trust to take responsibility. That is what they will get with Labour.

Penny Mordaunt: I note that today is the day of reflection marking three years since we first entered lockdown. I know all Members will be reflecting on the experiences of our constituents, as well as those of our own families, during those dark days, and reflecting in particular those who lost their lives and those to whom we owe an immense debt of gratitude for their role in defeating the virus and saving lives.

I wish to associate myself with the many tributes paid to PC Keith Palmer. My thoughts are with his colleagues and his family, and with the families of all those who lost their lives.

I wish to send my good wishes to the dockyard workers hurt in the accident at Leith.

The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), raises some serious points. First, I turn to the issue she raises about

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my hon. Friend the Minister for Women. I do not think there is any reason for the Minister for Women to apologise to the House. She has a reputation for cross-party working on issues that she cares passionately about, in particular around women's health, and she played a major role in work on the menopause, with the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

My understanding of what happened is that the Minister for Women could not make the date proposed and had offered other dates to the Committee. The reason she could not make the date was that she had given an undertaking to a Labour Member, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), to meet a group of women who were suffering from a particularly painful condition. That meeting was here, but it was scheduled for the same time as the planned Committee hearing. The Minister wanted to go ahead with the meeting, as the women had travelled some distance to come here. Ironically, the hon. Member for West Ham was unable to attend the meeting, for perfectly legitimate reasons. However, the Minister did not take to Twitter to denounce her for that or to encourage others to troll her. The Minister was doing her duty and she has offered other dates to the Committee to attend, just as she has attended the Committee many times before.

It is deeply ironic and shocking that people have been so quick to paint an incorrect picture about our female colleagues in this place, especially in the wake of International Women's Day, when we all used #AskHerToStand and supported working women. After this session, I will take to Twitter to show the Minister support for the brilliant work that she has done. She does not need to apologise to the House in any way.

The shadow Leader of the House mentions the issue of small boats. I have spoken to the Home Office about the impact assessment; it is quite right that we publish it before Committee stage. I think it will be published very shortly.

The hon. Lady focused the bulk of her remarks on the economy. I thank all Members who took part in the Budget debates. Three of the five priorities the Prime Minister set out in order to be accountable to the public—to increase growth, to reduce debt and to halve inflation—focus on the economy. Overall growth, and construction, manufacturing and services growth, are better than forecast. The Office for Budget Responsibility is revising its forecast on GDP in a positive way.

The UK now ranks third globally as a priority investment destination, which is the highest ranking in the history of our nation. We have the lowest rate of unemployment since 1974. The World Bank says we are the best-placed large European nation to do business in. We became the second country in the world to have foreign direct investment worth \$2 trillion. Over the last 13 years, we have become the world's third trillion-dollar tech economy. We have built the largest life science, TV and film sectors in Europe, and we are the second biggest service exporter in the world. I do not know how all that qualifies us to be the sick man of Europe.

The Labour party is either unaware of those facts or blind to them; the hon. Lady certainly does not want to listen to them. Best not do our country down, though, because these achievements are the achievements of our citizens—their entrepreneurship, their graft, their skill,

but also their attitude—and we want to give them ever-increased opportunity. That is why we are modernising our economy. That is why we are removing tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade—6,000 tariff lines are being removed—and increasing growth, exports and higher wages. That is good for the whole of society.

The statistics that the hon. Lady did not mention were the poverty statistics that have come out today. The figures show that 1.7 million fewer people are in absolute low income after housing costs now than when we took office: that includes 400,000 fewer children, 1 million fewer working-age adults and 200,000 fewer pensioners. Under Labour, benefits were the largest source of income for the poorest working-age households; it is now their earnings. There are now 1 million fewer workless households and an additional 3.8 million people in work.

We stand for personal responsibility and accountability. We want to help people to get on, earn more and keep more of what they earn, and to reward those who help others. Labour, in contrast, stands for dependency, decline and doing our country down.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad to have heard my right hon. Friend's response to the party political broadcast from the Opposition.

I want to raise two questions about people overseas. The first is about a constituent who is 32 weeks into a 24-week process to collect in a foreign capital his wife's passport with the authorised visa because they want to return together to the United Kingdom. While I have been listening to these exchanges, I have had a message saying that the visa has been authorised, but the constituent does not know when they will be able to collect the passport. If I write to my right hon. Friend, will she pass on my question to the Foreign Office's private office and get this sorted out? It has been going on for far too long.

My second question is about the life-and-death case of a hunted person in Afghanistan. He worked for the regional governor and was associated closely with the United Kingdom. If the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office cannot give him a way out, will I have to ask the Prime Minister next week to sort it out? People who have dedicated their life to helping us should not be left stranded as this person has been.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for both those important points. If he passes the details of both cases to me, I shall take them up immediately with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I associate myself, on this day in particular, with the Leader of the House's remarks about all those affected by covid, about the family and friends of Keith Palmer and our gratitude to him, and particularly about the dreadful incident yesterday in the Leith dockyard in my constituency? Our thoughts are with all those affected.

In her response, aka “Here’s one I prepared earlier,” the Leader of the House will no doubt ponder the difficulties currently preoccupying my party and swerve those of her own—but hey, that’s politics. Last week, she was a kind of Mystic Meg in reverse: she finally attempted some answers to questions I had posed to her over the last several months. Scotland Office spads really must keep up.

Yesterday was, I suppose, a thrilling day for political anoraks. The current PM finally shared at least a summary of his tax returns, showing very tidy sums indeed. That comes just days after we heard that a majority of UK workers have seen their salaries stagnate over 10 years—a lost decade of earnings. No wonder Downing Street tried to bury the PM’s news! European Research Group rebels and former Tory leaders did not manage to force a governmental U-turn over the Windsor framework, although a number of hon. Members appeared to be missing from the Lobby, so there may be more trouble ahead for the Leader and for her Government’s Whips.

And, of course, there was the former Prime Minister’s evidence session before the Privileges Committee. I will not go into the details of the session itself or the Committee’s activities—that would not be appropriate—but I do want to raise the attacks openly challenging its integrity. Mr Speaker himself has reminded us of the importance of allowing the Committee to complete its work without interference. Frankly, the attacks from some quarters carry the nasty whiff of Trumpian populism again, like “Stop the steal” or “Lock her up.” There is no catchy three-word slogan attached to this situation yet, but perhaps it is just a matter of time.

The Leader of the House served under the former Prime Minister in his Government. As the Cabinet Minister now responsible for this Government’s business, and arguably for defending their reputation, can she tell us what she makes of such attacks on the institutions of this Parliament? These are not internal party problems; they can be seen as an attack on democracy itself. The current Prime Minister pledged that he would lead his Government with

“integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level.”

Does the Leader of the House agree that these issues highlight again the need for restored trust and faith in parliamentary democracy, and will she allow the debate that I have called for previously on that very trust and integrity in parliamentary matters?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, and repeat my remarks about the incident in her constituency. All Members will be wishing those who were injured a speedy recovery.

Let me take the hon. Lady’s last point first. She may remember that, during last week’s business questions, I reminded Members that the whole House had asked the Privileges Committee to undertake this task, and that the Committee’s members were doing the House a service in doing so. However, to give her some more comfort, I will make two more points.

First, I refer the hon. Lady to the words of the former Prime Minister himself, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to the Committee yesterday in answer to one of its questions. He said that he was in front of the Committee in recognition of the task that the whole House had set,

and because of his respect for Parliament. Those are his words, and those who are trying to say that they are doing the former Prime Minister a favour should heed them.

Secondly, the hon. Lady referred to particular remarks that some Members had made about the Committee. Some of them have built their reputations on being servants of the House, and would never let grubby politics get in the way of true, good, sound argument and also good manners. I would gently point out to those colleagues who mentioned, for example, marsupials that they might have been too full of bounce when they made those remarks. The Committee needs to get on with its work.

The hon. Lady did not mention the poverty statistics that were published today, but she did mention poverty. Let me remind her that our cost of living package is worth £3,300 to every household, that we have uprated pensions and benefits by 10.1%, and that there has been the largest ever cash increase in the national living wage.

The hon. Lady talked about trust, and wanting trust to be restored. That is against the backdrop of her party’s having lost a great deal in the last few weeks. It has lost its leader, it has lost its chief executive, it has lost £600,000, it has lost 30,000 members, it has lost a by-election to us, it has lost collective responsibility, it has lost the will to defend its record and the rose-tinted glasses through which it has viewed its own performance, and this week it has also lost the plot. However, it has the opportunity to find something and to restore something. This could be a fresh start, and the beginning of its actually serving the people of Scotland by focusing on their needs. Whoever is the new leader of the hon. Lady’s party, and the First Minister in Scotland, we stand ready to work constructively with that leader.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My constituent Margaret’s beloved granddaughter died of sudden unexpected death in epilepsy, aged just 22. Every week in the UK at least 21 people die of SUDEP, which particularly affects the young. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in Government time on doing more to prevent these deaths, many of which are preventable, and will she join me in wearing something purple on Sunday for SUDEP Day, to remember those who have died and also to praise SUDEP Action and the Maisie Tothill Foundation for all that they are doing to tackle this problem?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point, which is obviously timely given the campaign day this weekend. I will very happily wear one of the purple hearts that the charity is handing out, and I join her in paying tribute to all those organisations that are raising awareness and ensuring that people suffering from the condition get the best care and support.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Committee was disappointed not to be allocated time for Backbench Business debates on Thursday 30th. I am sure it is not personal. We actually had an application for a debate on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, but the Government have taken it into their hands to schedule a debate on

[*Ian Mearns*]

that very important subject in Government time. Could the Leader of the House's office please let us know whether we are to get any time for Backbench Business debates in the first week back after the Easter recess? If we are, we will have to determine the subjects of those debates next week.

A number of Members across the House have asked me if I know whether the Government are planning to allocate additional time in this Session for private Members' Bills. I am not sure why they asked me—they must think I am some sort of shop steward on behalf of Members across the House—but the Session may have several months to go after tomorrow.

Lastly, the Home Office has told my office in Gateshead that there is now no service standard at all for responses in some categories of immigration casework for constituents my office is dealing with. Surely that cannot be right. There are not even any target timescales to get responses for constituents in particular categories of cases. Has the Home Secretary just given up? Can we have a statement from her about when she is going to do something to improve the situation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He will know why the business that I have just announced includes a debate, at his Committee's request, on the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I hope he knows that I champion the interests of his Committee very much, and I fully appreciate that he will need notice of further time for next week. I undertake to provide that, and to look at what he said with regard to private Members' Bills.

I invite the hon. Gentleman to give me the specifics of what his office has been told by the Home Office. I get regular updates from the Home Office, because it knows that I and all Members of the House are interested in its performance. I have a letter dated 22 March, which charts how the Home Office is crunching through the backlogs and its performance standards. It has made good progress; for example, it has reduced the number of cases on these matters that it is dealing with from 37,000 at the end of August to just over 4,000 today. If he passes me the details of what his office has been told, I shall test that against the information that I have been given, but the Home Office is working hard to raise the standard for all Members.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you and the Leader of the House will know that tomorrow is the 13th and final day scheduled for debate of private Members' Bills in this Session. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in paying tribute to the Comptroller of His Majesty's Household, our hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris)—and, indeed, those on the Opposition Front Bench—for facilitating in this Session the passage of, I think, a record number of Bills to the other place. In the absence of any further sitting Fridays, can my right hon. Friend explain what will happen if any of those Bills that have gone to the other place are amended? How will we be able to deal with those amendments in this place without any further sitting Fridays?

Will my right hon. Friend take into account that there are now two precedents in recent times when the Session went on much longer—in this case we are talking about

six months—than was originally scheduled? In one case there were 18 sitting Fridays—in other words, an additional five—and on the other occasion there were an additional four sitting Fridays. Will she ask the Procedure Committee to advise the House on how to take this matter forward?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me and the whole House the opportunity to put on the record our thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) and all hon. Members who have worked so hard to put through some very important Bills. Since becoming Leader of the House, I have used the communication channels I have to shine a spotlight on a lot of this work, which does not really get much credit and goes unseen. It is very important; we have done some very good things. I have heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and other Members have said with regard to time for private Members' Bills. Whatever happens in the other place, we will always find a way to deal with it.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I was recently contacted by a constituent who had been contacted by their housing provider and told that their energy bills were going up by 800%, a figure that I was most shocked by. I contacted that housing association, and it transpired that not only was that an administrative error, but it affected more than 1,000 residents. It is seriously concerning that, if that constituent had not contacted me, residents could have faced that price rise. The housing association has already been named by the Levelling Up Secretary—a process that the Government promised to drive up standards. Will the Leader of the House urge the Levelling Up Secretary to update the House on the progress made by housing associations that have been named and shamed, and the measures being taken with respect to those that are failing?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady on her diligence in spotting the error, alerting her constituents to it and taking it up with the housing provider. She courteously did not name the provider on the Floor of the House; had she done so, I would have repeated it at the Dispatch Box. That is very poor performance on its part. The hon. Lady will know that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has strengthened the powers that people have to hold their landlords to account. If she needs any assistance in rectifying the situation, I will be very happy to act on her behalf if she passes the specific details to me.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The Leader of the House will no doubt recall that we both ran on a manifesto commitment in 2010 to scrap Labour's plans for identity cards, and we were supported by the electorate on libertarian and privacy grounds. Given that there has been no public consultation on the matter since, can we please have a debate on any Government plans for the introduction of digital IDs, which have recently been trumpeted by Tony Blair, the heir apparent to the World Economic Forum throne and, interestingly, the original proponent of the identity card plans that the electorate rejected at the ballot box?

Penny Mordaunt: I will say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, that is our record; it is incredibly important that such matters are debated, but there are

no such plans to introduce the measures that he alludes to. Neither, I am afraid, is the mention of the World Economic Forum or some global conspiracy that sits behind all of this remotely accurate or based in fact.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, having seen some of the things that he has put out this week, that—he is very diligent—he might like to do some research as to the origins of some of the things that he has been putting on his Twitter account: for example, that the US Department of Defence is actually responsible for producing covid. The provenance of those falsehoods is Russia and China. If the hon. Gentleman wants to repeat such conspiracy theories and if he believes them, I pity him. If he does not believe them and he is repeating them for another matter, I would ask him to check his behaviour.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady will be aware of a protest outside the Indian high commission last Sunday that turned violent. Staff working for the high commission were injured, and the high commission itself was vandalised. I am sure the whole House will agree that there should be no place in our country for such behaviour, and that the Indian high commissioner and his staff should be able to go about their diplomatic duties without fear of such events happening. What further steps will the Home Office take, working with the Metropolitan police, to ensure there is no repeat of such behaviour?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning that appalling incident. We strongly condemn the vandalism and violent acts that took place outside the Indian high commission in London. It was a completely unacceptable action against the high commission and its staff. There is ongoing work with the Metropolitan police to review the protection measures around the high commission, and any changes will be made to ensure the safety and security of its staff so that they can go about their business, serving both this country and India.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): As the House will know, bus services in Rother Valley—especially the No. 27, which goes through Swallownest—have been cut of late, and residents are very upset. Residents are also aware that transport is devolved, so they and I are calling on the Labour South Yorkshire Mayor to use his franchising powers to bring the buses under public control and to introduce a London-style public transport system, so that routes such as the No. 27 to Crystal Peaks can be reintroduced. Can we have a debate on why the franchising process in South Yorkshire has fallen so many years behind Greater Manchester, which also has a Labour Mayor but has a far better transport system?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. He knows that we very much want to support and enable modern and efficient bus services, hence our more than £3 billion investment in bus transformation. I congratulate him on making that call of his Mayor, and he will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Members will recall the large volume of correspondence we all received from constituents last summer relating to backlogs in the Passport Office. We now know that civil servants from the Public and Commercial Services Union will be taking five weeks of continuous industrial action from 3 April because their pay is so low. According to a recent survey, many working at the Passport Office are resorting to food banks. Can we have a debate in Government time on how Ministers intend to negotiate a settlement to avert the need for this industrial action and to end endemic poverty pay across the civil service?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that many Departments across Whitehall are in negotiations with unions, with some considerable success in recent weeks. We want to ensure that people have fair pay, but that that fair pay does not exacerbate the inflation situation we face. The next Home Office questions are not until 22 May, so I will write on the hon. Gentleman's behalf to ensure that the Home Secretary has heard what he has said today.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cricket. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the future of grassroots cricket? Village cricket is a force not only for sporting excellence but for social cohesion and social good. We have seen an alarming decline in the number of local clubs, especially in disadvantaged parts of the country. We need a debate to discuss how we can work in partnership to ensure that everyone in the country has access to a cricket club.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for all the work he does as chair of the APPG on cricket. I agree entirely with his sentiments. He knows we are working closely with Sport England, UK Sport and national governing bodies to improve access and inclusion, from grassroots level up to elite level. The forthcoming sport strategy will set out further detail on how we can make sport more inclusive. We have a very exciting season ahead of us, and I thank all members of the APPG for the work they do to promote that important sport.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the Leader of the House said that we can expect the impact assessment for the Illegal Migration Bill to be published shortly, but the Bill is to be debated at the beginning of next week. The Government assured us that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would reduce the number of small boat crossings, but we have already seen record levels in January and February 2023. The Government have completely failed. If they have not done proper calculations to produce an impact assessment, how can they make assertions about the effectiveness of the Bill we are debating on Monday and Tuesday?

Penny Mordaunt: I have no argument with the hon. Gentleman's desire to have the impact assessment produced as early as possible. I have made representations to that effect, and I am told that it will be published shortly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There is clearly a serious crisis in the Metropolitan police. Can we have an urgent debate on how to ensure that the

[Theresa Villiers]

Mayor of London puts in place a plan to deal with the issues raised by the Casey report, and on how to improve the effectiveness of the police in London so that they crack down on street robbery, burglary and car crime?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend raises a serious matter. We have all been shocked by the findings of the Casey review. The Labour London Mayor's response is very important. Whereas crime has fallen across the country and, when computer crime is taken out of the statistics, has actually halved since 2010, there is a different picture in London. Although the number of assaults with a sharp object is down by 23% nationally, it has gone up by 11% in London. Homicide is up 16.6%. Londoners deserve better, so I think that would be an excellent topic for a debate, and I encourage her to apply for it.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The BBC is proposing to close BBC Singers and to cut its symphony, philharmonic and concert orchestras. So much for the commitment to inform, educate and entertain. What discussions have the Government had with the BBC to try to save these institutions and the UK's reputation for high-quality classical music?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. He is not the first Member to raise the issue, as it has been a common and recurring theme on the Floor of the House since the decision was taken. I understand a consultation is taking place at the moment. The BBC is clearly an independent body, but I note that it has demonstrated great skill at doing pragmatic U-turns in a very short space of time. This might be another opportunity to demonstrate that skill.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Members will be aware that the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill is currently in Committee in the other place. Earlier this week, six companies called Groceries Ltd were set up at six residential addresses on a single residential road in Seaton. The owners of these fake companies are almost certainly not resident in the UK, but the real residents will have to go through bureaucracy and, potentially, a court appearance to prove that these fake companies should not have been registered. Can the Leader of the House let my constituents know what priority will be accorded to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill in the consideration of Lords amendments by this House?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that serious point. That, and other forms of identity theft, can be enormously distressing for individuals. We have introduced the Bill and other legislation to tackle these issues. If he needs any particular support on those individual cases, I would be happy to assist him. We are here to ensure that legislation is scrutinised and, where possible, improved, so it will be business as usual for this Bill. I am glad we are bringing it forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The hooliganism of Khalistani hooligans outside the Indian high commission on Sunday is a disgrace to this country. This is the sixth time in as many years that the high commission has

been attacked in a similar way. As my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), pointed out, security guards were injured, an attempt was made to remove the tricolour and windows were smashed. Khalistani militants are operating across the world; Canada, the United States and Australia saw similar attacks over the weekend. We are harbouring Khalistani terrorists in this country right now. Can we have a debate in Government time on what action we can take to ensure that these terrorists are held to account and banned in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for adding his voice to those of others who have condemned this action. We take the security of the Indian high commission extremely seriously and we have been in close contact with the Government of India on this issue. He will know that it will be for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to determine whether action involving warrants and criminal proceedings is needed, and I am not able to comment further on that.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House might be able to help the Select Committee on Home Affairs by publishing in the Library the letter dated 22 March to which she referred earlier, because we are all keen to know what is going on in the Home Office and that letter might provide some illumination for the Committee.

However, my real question is about the recent Care Quality Commission report on the Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, where the overall rating was that it now "Requires improvement". I am pleased to see that the care the trust provides is rated as "Good", but I am disappointed overall for my constituents and the extremely hard-working staff who work in the area, which has huge health and social inequalities. May we have a debate about how health inequalities have widened over the past 13 years, how life expectancy for the poorest is now falling and what the Government are going to do to support the NHS in my constituency, which is now facing the reality of 13 years of a Tory Government?

Penny Mordaunt: On the right hon. Lady's first point, she will know that I take the performance of Departments and the quality of the services they provide to all Members of this House very seriously. Lord True, the Leader of the House of Lords, and I have been to visit every permanent secretary to discuss where we think improvements can be made, and I have to say that the Home Office writes to me frequently about progress that it is making against concerns. I would be happy to meet the right hon. Lady if she has any outstanding concerns that have not been raised with me to see what further I can do to improve that performance.

The right hon. Lady will know how to apply for a debate on the issue she raises. My constituency is demographically similar to hers and our life expectancy has been improving and great progress has been made in healthcare. However, there is a mixed picture around the country, which is why we want more transparency on healthcare performance in various parts of the country.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Last week, the Prime Minister agreed the deepening of the Australia, UK and US partnership on defence. That is

fantastic news for my constituents, as Rolls-Royce's nuclear section will provide the reactors for Australia's very first nuclear-powered submarines and that supports jobs, not just in Rolls-Royce, but throughout the supply chain. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement by the Business Secretary on how the Government's international agreements, including AUKUS, are leading to huge investments and supporting local jobs up and down the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. AUKUS is an incredibly important partnership. It is much more than a submarine deal, but the interoperability for that particular service will be hugely beneficial to all Five Eyes partners. I am delighted that Rolls-Royce, which is such a fantastic company, one that showcases British innovation and skills, will be building the reactors for all of Australia's submarines.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): During covid lockdowns, Vimal Pandya helped hundreds of local people across Rotherhithe with shopping, prescriptions and more. Her late Majesty the Queen recognised and commended his exceptional contribution, but the Home Office refuses to do so, preventing him from regularising his stay in the UK by removing his passport. Will the Leader of the House honour her comments about today being the third anniversary of the first lockdown and the extraordinary sacrifice made by so many by providing time to debate Vimal's exceptional case? He is a local hero who has the gratitude of thousands of my constituents, including me.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. He knows that I cannot deliberate on such matters, but I will assist him in raising the case if he has had difficulty in getting a response from the Home Office. If he would pass me the details after this session, I would be happy to do that.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has sown death and destruction across the middle east and has oppressed its own citizens simply for calling for basic human rights protections. However, I am afraid that the issue is now coming much closer to home, because there are growing and well-documented concerns that the IRGC is expanding its activities here in the UK, with 15 recent assassinations foiled, extremism promoted in religious centres and the deplorable intimidation of journalists. Will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate in Government time about proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. This issue is raised frequently, not only at business questions, but at other times across this House every week. Vahid Beheshti is currently on the 29th day of a hunger strike to highlight the exact issue that my hon. Friend raises. His motivation for this, which was echoed in my hon. Friend's question, is this organisation's actions, not just in Iran, but elsewhere in the world, including Ukraine and the United Kingdom. It is hunting down people who criticise the regime, kidnapping them and engaging in other forms of intimidation. I am sure that if my hon. Friend applied for a debate, it would be extremely well attended.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent was diagnosed and treated for spinal cancer, but she has been left with some mobility issues. In her words, she has been fighting the Department for Work and Pensions for four years on her claim for incapacity employment and support allowance. My office made an inquiry to the MPs' hotline on 31 January. There should be a 15-day turnaround time for a response, but despite my office chasing this up on 23 February, 7 March, 14 March and 16 March, we still do not have a response on my constituent's case. So may I get a statement on what we can do to get a resolution to this and an analysis of the wider performance of the DWP?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about this case. As the hon. Gentleman will know, if he gives me the details, I will assist him in getting his constituent an answer immediately.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the marvellous work being done in London, Brighton, Manchester and Blackpool with opt-out testing, following fantastic campaigns by the Terrence Higgins Trust and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). We are now weeks away from the end of the first year of opt-out testing. In the first 10 months, emergency departments in those areas have diagnosed almost 1,500 people with HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. As the anniversary approaches, we will have a full year's-worth of data to look at. Will she find time for a debate to explore the further roll-out of opt-out testing to all areas of high prevalence?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to this very important work, and I pay tribute to all the organisations that have assisted, including the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation. My hon. Friend is right, in that the accident and emergency departments involved have diagnosed 268 people with HIV and found a further 139 people who knew that they were HIV positive but were not engaged with services. There are benefits elsewhere, as they found a further 730 people with hepatitis B and 299 people with hepatitis C. I think this is something we should be doing everywhere and I commend all those involved in this initiative and care for making such good progress.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The crisis in NHS dentistry continues to worsen. Only this month, another dental surgery in my constituency, Bell Barn dental surgery, not only stopped new NHS patients from joining, but removed its entire NHS list and became fully private. I have had extensive correspondence with Ministers, tabled written parliamentary questions, and had a debate in this House in January last year on the issue. Could the Leader of the House advise me on what more I could do to encourage her ministerial colleagues to take the issue more seriously?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I know that Ministers take the subject very seriously; I have had many conversations with them about it, because I faced a similar situation in my constituency. He will know about the uplift in funding provided. Quite often, the issue is whether local commissioners are using the flexibility

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that they have. He asks for my advice. I held a dental summit in my constituency, and brought all the partners round the table. We have new providers and are making good progress. I am happy to offer him any advice and assistance that I can, but as I say, Ministers are taking this seriously. He will know that they are also looking forward to bringing forward reforms.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The hospitality industry has been abandoned by the Government during the cost of living crisis. I invite the Leader of the House to my constituency of Wansbeck to visit Peter and Vicki, of V. Gorman's Fish and Chips. They have a very popular fish and chip shop—a very successful business that, like many others in our region and indeed nation, is struggling to survive. Sky-high energy costs and increased food prices are crippling their business. Customers are struggling to put food on the table. The challenges facing Peter and Vicki seem insurmountable without Government assistance. Can we have a debate in Government time to assess what support can be given to businesses that are struggling, before it is all too late for far too many?

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is not usual for the occupant of the Chair to get an invitation from those speaking on the Floor of the House—I have never heard of that happening before—but I would welcome you to my constituency to enjoy the fine culinary delights of V. Gorman's fish and chips.

Penny Mordaunt: That is a very kind invitation, which I hope you will take up, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is an incredibly important sector, but I do not see how the hon. Gentleman can say that it has not been a focus of ours, and has not received support. It has had bespoke support, ranging from energy support to very considerable rates relief. We will continue to work with the sector, and to support it as we make a recovery.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Since 2011, the number of teachers of the deaf has dropped by almost 20% nationally. A recent written parliamentary question that I tabled regarding the number of teachers of the deaf in and around my constituency was met with the response,

“Information on the number of qualified teachers of the deaf is not collected by the department.”

Yet the testimony of one of my constituents, whose sixth-month-old daughter is deaf, was that although her teacher was amazing, they were overworked and running on empty, due to recent staff shortages. I am deeply concerned that the Government will not get to grips with this crisis unless the Department for Education has collated the necessary data, so will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the workload of teachers of the deaf, and on ensuring that the Department has the relevant data?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important point. Anyone who suffers from any kind of disability, be it hearing loss or a special education need, needs proper, qualified teachers to enable them to reach their full potential. Given that Education questions are a little way off, I will write to the Secretary of State for Education, as well as the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Disabled

People, Health and Work, because I think that this type of data is held in the Cabinet Office, in its equalities section. I will find that out for the hon. Gentleman. I would be very surprised if the data was not held somewhere, but clearly it should be with the Department for Education. I will follow up for him.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My constituents Matt and Liz are hosting two refugees, Anna and Nastya, who fled Ukraine and came to the UK in their car. They have been able to get a maximum of only 12 months of temporary car registration. To avoid some very high and complicated UK and Ukraine registration charges and import taxes, they are planning to drive back to Dnipro next month to leave their car in the war zone. It is a ridiculous situation. There should be a temporary extension to car registration for Ukrainian refugees—perhaps for the length of their visa. I have written to a Minister, but could we have a statement from the Government on how we can make that happen quickly? Or could the Leader of the House perhaps get me a swift response and resolution to the problem?

Penny Mordaunt: The situation that the hon. Gentleman describes is crackers. I thank him for raising it. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which is leading on support for Ukrainian refugees for the Government, is looking at precisely these sorts of issues, which are coming up now, nearly a year since those refugees arrived here. They should not have to go back into a war zone to deposit their vehicle. From memory, I think that this issue is being looked at. I will write to DLUHC and the Department for Transport. If the hon. Gentleman gives me a reference number for the case, we will try to get it resolved swiftly for him.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My Rutherglen constituent Azeem Ahmed, aged 21, is seeking to launch a new clothing brand, “Equal Clothing”. Azeem has muscular dystrophy, and will create accessible clothing for people with physical disabilities like him. He is also hoping to further the representation of physical disabilities in the fashion industry, and to inspire others to pursue their creative passions. May we have a debate in Government time on furthering accessibility, diversity and equal opportunities in fashion and other industries?

Penny Mordaunt: I very much congratulate the hon. Lady's constituent on his achievements, and thank her for putting a spotlight on the issue and his work. As part of a Government scheme, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions are working with several disability and access ambassadors on a Cabinet Office initiative that champions this issue across the arts and creative industries. I would be very happy to put the hon. Lady's office in touch with the relevant parts of Whitehall.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On 23 January, the BBC broadcast an excellent “Panorama” programme that focused on dangerous dogs. It cited a loophole in the regulations on dog breeding. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs following that programme, asking what measures the Government were considering taking to close the loophole. I received a reply, but there is no attempt whatsoever in

it to answer my question. Will the Leader of the House organise a seminar for Ministers on how to answer correspondence and questions?

Penny Mordaunt: On the substantive issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, he will know that we have done a huge amount to tighten up regulations on dog breeding and the sale of animals. If he has any further ideas, I would encourage him to persist in raising them with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because it is keen to ensure that we have the best animal welfare in the world; its track record in legislating demonstrates that.

We already have done correspondence training sessions with Departments, correspondence teams, and parliamentary Clerk teams. I have done training on this issue personally, as have my staff, and we will continue to do so. We are making a big push on the training that we offer to Whitehall, and we had all the permanent secretaries in Parliament, talking to the Leader of the House of Lords and me about our expectations. I take this very seriously. If the hon. Gentleman needs any further help getting satisfaction from DEFRA, we stand ready to assist.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): We are in the run-up to the mayoral elections, in which there will be a requirement for a valid form of voter identification. Constituents in my Liverpool, Riverside, constituency who turn up with their 60-plus local travel pass will be turned away from the polling station, unlike people in other parts of the country that have something similar. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time to discuss these disparities and people being disenfranchised as a result?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that we do not think that will be a consequence of requiring people to prove who they are when going to vote, and there is a great deal of flexibility over what ID can be used. If she thinks that people in her constituency are being treated differently, I will be happy to write to the Minister with responsibility for the constitution to ensure that there is a legitimate reason why the returning officer in her area will not accept that particular form of ID.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituent Mujtaba Kheradmand served for nine years with the technical engineer section of the British Army in Afghanistan. Since the withdrawal, his father has been murdered by the Taliban and his mother and younger sister are now wholly dependent on him. However, they have faced insurmountable difficulties with the UK Government's Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme, which will not consider them as close family members. Can we have a debate in Government time on the situation that he and others face, and the absolutely tiny numbers being processed through the additional family member scheme?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the case that the hon. Gentleman raises and, if there is anything that my office can do to assist in getting that resolved, I would be happy to do that. He will know that since Operation Pitting and the evacuation we have been able to extract a number of people—very many hundreds—from Afghanistan. It is often unhelpful to talk about the routes they take and the means by which that is done in

a public forum, for reasons that he will understand, but the fact that we have done that for many hundreds of people should give him comfort. I will be happy to look at the specific case and see if I can assist him.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, a joint report from Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Middle East Concern and Article18, entitled “Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran”, was launched in this House. The report highlights the double vulnerability of women as religious minorities in Iran. That country's political crackdown on its citizens has received a lot of attention in the House, but women from religious minorities are often overlooked in the larger picture. The Leader of the House is always very receptive and I appreciate her responses; will she arrange a meeting with the Foreign Secretary so that we can discuss the recommendations of the report?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising an important point that all Members want to keep the spotlight on. I will certainly pursue the meeting he suggests, and perhaps suggest a meeting with the envoys for gender equality and freedom of religion as well—I am sure that he works with those individuals already, but it is important to discuss these latest situations.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish the hon. Gentleman happy birthday for this weekend. I am sure I speak for the whole House in putting on record our gratitude for the very romantic early-day motion 992 on the 50th anniversary of “I Will Always Love You”.

[That this House celebrates the 50th Anniversary of Dolly Parton's hit song I Will Always Love You; notes the sentiment behind this song and what it means to so many, including the wife of the hon. Member for Strangford; highlights the contribution this song and her music in general to the industry, especially in the late 1960s, early 1970s and over the last 50 years; further notes the large scale event held at the weekend in Dolly Parton's multi-million dollar theme park at Pigeon Forge in East Tennessee as part of the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the song, that was written as a farewell to her business partner and mentor Peter Wagoner; and wishes Dolly continued success as she entertains and encourages so many through her music and inspirational character.]

I say that not “Just Because I'm a Woman”, but because the hon. Gentleman is so diligent, working more than “9 to 5”. Every week without fail at the end of business questions we look at who has the last question and we say, “Here You Come Again” and it is “Gonna Be You”—with apologies to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for breaking protocol. The hon. Gentleman has cheered us all up again, as he always does.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): On this occasion, Andy Slaughter is last.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will grant it as my birthday present to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I am taking last place behind him.

Afghan refugee children who have already spent 18 months in hotels are being removed out of London—not to settled accommodation, but to other hotels several hundred miles away. That breaks the Home Office's own guidelines on moving children in the middle of

[*Andy Slaughter*]

exam periods. Asylum-seeking children are having to travel four hours a day to continue their education, again after compulsory relocation and despite the fact that under guidelines they should be placed no more than an hour's travel from where they are housed. Will the Leader of the House persuade the Home Secretary either to follow her own rules, or to come to the House to explain why she refuses to do so?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises very serious matters. The reason that we have those protocols and procedures in place is to ensure that children and young people are given every possible chance to recover from the trauma they have gone through and to get on with their lives, and that they are safe and able to access education. We have put those rules in place for a reason. I am sure the hon. Gentleman has raised the specific examples that he is concerned with, but I urge him please to lean on my office as well. These issues may be widespread, but it does sound as if they are very localised and because of local pressures. The final thing I would say to him is that this is an indication of how under pressure the system is and how inappropriate hotel accommodation is for families. That is why we are bringing forward measures on illegal migration, and I encourage him and all Members to consider that when the Illegal Migration Bill comes to Committee next week.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for answering the business question and join her in her felicitations to the hon. Member for Strangford.

Post Office: Horizon Compensation

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we come to the statement, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. As has been said to the House on previous occasions, there are relevant active legal proceedings in the Court of Appeal. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of matters sub judice to allow reference to those proceedings, as they may concern issues of national importance. However, I urge Members to exercise caution in what they say and to avoid referring in detail to cases that remain before the Court of Appeal.

12.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Post Office and compensation for the Horizon scandal.

The Horizon scandal was a truly appalling episode in this country's history. Our postmasters—those hard-working, thoroughly decent people, who give so much to our communities right across the country—were made to suffer horrifically and for many years. We want the postmasters who fought to expose that injustice through the High Court to receive compensation on a similar basis to their peers. I put on record our thanks to Alan Bates and the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and to many others, journalists and parliamentarians, who were key to the campaign.

On 7 December we announced the outline of the group litigation order compensation scheme. I am delighted to tell the House that from today, the scheme is open to receive claims. Details of how to claim can be found on the gov.uk website. I am writing to GLO members today with further information and placing copies of that information, the scheme application form, scheme guidance and principles, and questions and answers for the scheme in the Library of the House.

Our legal powers to pay compensation expire in August 2024. We certainly intend and expect to make payments much faster than that. We said in December that we would follow an alternative dispute resolution model. We have appointed Dentons as claims facilitators to promote the fair and prompt resolution of each case. We have also appointed Addleshaw Goddard as our external legal adviser on the scheme. They have been instructed to recommend fair offers.

In December we also announced an independent advisory board to oversee the scheme. Reports of its meetings are available on gov.uk. I put on record my thanks to board members Professor Chris Hodges and Professor Richard Moorhead, as well as to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot—who is in the Public Gallery—both of whom have long been tireless campaigners for the wronged postmasters. I am pleased to announce that the remit of the advisory board will be expanded to cover the historical shortfall scheme, postmasters' suspension pay, and compensation for postmasters with overturned convictions.

I am pleased to report that good progress is also being made by the Post Office on compensating other groups of postmasters. As of 20 March, the Post Office has paid out more than £17.6m in compensation to postmasters

with overturned historical convictions, 79 postmasters have received interim compensation payments, and 49 non-pecuniary claims have been paid. The Post Office has reached full and final settlement in four cases.

On the historic shortfall scheme, 98% of eligible claimants had been issued offers of compensation, totalling £90.2 million, as of 21 March. I recognise that in recent weeks concerns have been raised about the tax position of claimants in that scheme. It has always been the intention of the scheme to return postmasters to the position that they should have been in had they not been affected by the Horizon scandal. The Government want to see fair compensation for all victims, and my Department is working urgently to address that issue with the Post Office, the Treasury and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

As we talk about financial compensation schemes, we must never lose sight of the human cost of this dreadful injustice. That is why, as the House will know, Sir Wyn Williams is chairing a statutory inquiry to establish what went wrong, and to identify those responsible for what has happened so that, where possible, we can hold them to account. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.1 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it.

I too begin by paying tribute to Alan Bates and the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, which has campaigned for decades for compensation, justice and the truth. In addition, I recognise the campaigning efforts of Members from across this House on behalf of their constituents, and join the Minister in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in particular. There can be no doubt that he has played an instrumental role in helping to chart a route to justice for thousands of people. We all wholeheartedly thank him for that.

The House is in unanimous agreement that the Horizon scandal has been a shocking injustice. Indeed, I think it is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the greatest scandals of modern times. As we continue to hear in the public inquiry the accounts of lives torn apart by the scandal, we can never lose sight of how devastating its impact has been on those victims. Today's announcement of the group litigation order compensation scheme is very welcome. I was pleased to hear about the appointment of claims facilitators and external legal advisers—in the interests of full transparency, I declare that I am a former employee of Addleshaw Goddard.

I thank the Minister and his predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for their work on this matter. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that I feel duty-bound to put on record the level of frustration that many people have felt about how protracted their fight for justice has been, particularly the 555 litigants excluded from the original historic shortfall scheme. Indeed, one of the first speeches that I made from this Dispatch Box as shadow Business Secretary was in support of calls for compensation to be expanded

to them—a campaign that was established long before that exchange nearly 18 months ago. The most important step now is for that compensation to reach victims as quickly as possible, so may I press the Minister on the steps that we will all take to ensure that the process is completed as swiftly as possible?

I am also grateful for the update on the historic shortfall scheme. The Government's ambition was for that scheme to be completed at the end of last year, but in December, the then Secretary of State said that 93% of eligible claimants had been issued offers of compensation. The Minister has given the figure of 98% today, so can he confirm that the scheme's completion is imminent? I also was pleased that he raised the tax issue. Will he commit to coming back to the House when he can to provide more information on the work that he said he is doing?

Today's announcement is certainly welcome, but as we all await the conclusion of the public inquiry, and its recommendations, surely this is one of many steps that we need to take to make amends for what has been the most insidious of injustices.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words, and for welcoming the statement and the opening of the scheme. I absolutely concur that we should all be grateful for the work of my predecessors—not least, as he said, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we want to do this as quickly as possible. I am very pleased with the work of the advisory board, which is helping with the scheme. The scheme is based on a set of principles that should mean that compensation is delivered more rapidly and that there is a clear route to claims being settled quickly. We very much hope that that is the case—we want to get those payments out of the door at the earliest possible opportunity.

Again, we are working at pace on the tax issue. Clearly that is a matter of law as well as of tax policy, so getting that right is key. We have to work with the Treasury and HMRC to ensure that we get it right, but that is a determination and a commitment that I am very happy to make. We hope to make a further announcement on that work shortly.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): At last. I remind the House that 27 people have died in the wait for justice. That said, I commend the Minister and his processor for their fabulous compassion, energy and drive in delivering what we are seeing today. However, there are people I represent among the 555 who have still not received any compensation for a variety of reasons, so can the Minister tell the House whether the scheme, under its brilliant advisory board—some of whom are in the Chamber—will cover all 555 claimants?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his words. He is absolutely right that it has taken too long and people have died waiting for compensation. That is totally unacceptable, and the worst part of that delay was the obfuscation and denials of the Post Office when clear evidence that something was sadly amiss was brought to light by parliamentarians. Yes, it is absolutely the case that we want every single person of the 555 who merit compensation to get it so that it is fair across the

[Kevin Hollinrake]

board—so that, between them, the three schemes deliver fair outcomes and there is parity across them. I am determined to make sure that that happens, as is the advisory board. We will report back to Parliament regularly to ensure that Members are aware that that is the case.

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

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Of course, I welcome what he outlined, and, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, I am very grateful to him for keeping me updated.

We now have three streams for former postmasters and sub-postmasters who were affected by Horizon to claim compensation—that is really important. The Minister has talked about achieving parity, and I think he will agree that that must be done. I would be keen to for him come back to the House to tell us that it is happening and that the latest compensation scheme will not run out of time.

I think it worth mentioning again the hard work done by the JFSA, by journalists such as Nick Wallis, by Members of this House and by former Members who are now in the other place. They have all been of great help to the APPG. I came into the House not knowing anything about Horizon—I wish I did not know what I know now. I congratulate the Minister and his predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), on grabbing hold of this matter and making things happen. So many people will be grateful.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words and for all the work she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. She is right to say that there are three separate schemes, and there was probably a good reason for that at the time. It is not ideal to have three schemes, and Sir Wyn Williams referred to that in his comments, but we are all keen to see consistency across the three schemes. That is why I welcome the work of the advisory board, which will cover all three schemes to make sure there is consistency across them. I am determined to make sure that happens, and I will keep her fully informed on progress.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is a terrible scandal, and Post Office Ltd is not fit for purpose. Thirty years ago, when I was a Post Office Minister, I tried to privatise this body, and it is still in a mess. Only last week, I had a meeting with sub-postmasters led by David Ward, one of my excellent local sub-postmasters, and they are calling for something good to come out of this scandal—namely, that we pass control directly to sub-postmasters, for instance through mutualisation.

We have the chief executive of Post Office Ltd paying himself a salary five times more than the Prime Minister, with a bonus of £400,000 a year on top of that. We have banking remuneration to Post Office Ltd coming to £205 million, of which only 27% went to sub-postmasters. We have 11,000 sub-postmasters in a state of managed decline, earning virtually the minimum wage. I wrote to the Minister on 14 March, so he will have received the

letter by now. I do not expect him to reply immediately to my question, but will he at least have an open mind about trying to take us forward and preserve the wonderful world of our sub-postmasters, particularly in rural England?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his points, and I also hope that some good comes out of this terrible scandal. I am a big fan of mutual organisations. I am happy to have a conversation with him. I will respond in writing, and perhaps we can meet following that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and advance notice of it, and the members of the advisory board for their important work.

I want to focus on one particular sentence of the Minister's statement, which is very important. He said that the intention of the compensation scheme is

“to return postmasters to the position that they should have been in had they not been affected by the Horizon scandal”.

He will know that that has an important meaning in law for the calculation of compensation. Some victims of this scandal feel that they have not been fully put back into the position they would have been in had they not been a victim of this scandal. Can he confirm for those victims what process they should follow to ensure that the compensation scheme delivers on its intention as stated on the Floor of the House today?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work as Chair of the Select Committee. There is a clear process in the GLO scheme for a claim being submitted and then settled. There is claims facilitation if a case cannot be settled, and an independent panel following that. Through those processes, there should be a mechanism to get fair compensation. If he has evidence of people who feel they are in the situation that he refers to, I would be keen to meet him to discuss those cases.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. I started campaigning on this issue only weeks after being elected to the House in 2010 when I was approached by two of the victims of this scandal, my constituents Mr and Mrs Rudkin. Thanks to the diligent work of Ron Warmington and his team of forensic accounts at Second Sight, by 2015, I and other Members of this House with an interest, the Post Office and, importantly, the Government were well aware of the overwhelming evidence produced that showed these convictions were at least unsafe and that there had been a huge miscarriage of justice. That was in 2015. Will the Minister tell the House why it has taken a further eight years to get to a position where convictions have been overturned and compensation is now beginning to be paid out to the victims? How will we hold to account those who are responsible for this prolonged injustice against the sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his work; he is a long-standing campaigner on this issue. He is right to point to the work of Second Sight, which

was pretty critical to our getting to this point. The work of Members across the House in drawing attention to these issues shows Parliament at its best and what it is capable of doing, and I pay tribute to all Members of this place and of the Lords who have done that.

As I said, it took too long initially for the Post Office to hold its hands up and say that things were wrong. It had to be held to account in a court, which resulted in the settlement in December 2019. I agree that we need this as quickly as possible. It is also important that we get these schemes right. We want to make sure we get the compensation right the first time, and that is why it has taken a little bit of time, but we are in a much better place now. We are keen to get these payments out by August 2024, and ideally a lot quicker than that.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I declare an interest, as a member of the GLO advisory board. Today would not have happened without Alan Bates and the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance's tireless campaign over many years. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and the Minister for the way in which they have approached this scheme. Now the test is to get money to these claimants as quickly as possible.

I thank the Minister for agreeing to the advisory board's request to extend our remit to cover both the historical shortfall and the overturned conviction schemes, but he knows what I am going to say now. There must be equalisation of the schemes, to ensure that individuals under the historical shortfall scheme are not taxed or liable to bankruptcy clawback. He will not be surprised to know that that will be one of our first requests at the first meeting.

I thank the Minister for his work. This is a historic step forward, but there is still a lot of distrust, and the postmasters and victims will not be happy until those who were responsible for this scandal are held to account in a court of law. That obviously will come after the public inquiry, but their day of reckoning needs to come.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his work, including on the advisory board, which is much appreciated. He is right to reference Alan Bates, as I did. I spoke to Alan this morning, and he is pleased with the steps we have taken, as I think the right hon. Gentleman is, but the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. We need to make sure these schemes work properly. When he and Lord Arbuthnot asked to expand the board's remit to the other two schemes, I was pleased to support that wish. He is right to point to tax and bankruptcy. We need to make sure these people are treated fairly across all three schemes. We will leave no stone unturned—and I know he will not either—in making sure that happens.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank the Minister, who has followed in his predecessor's footsteps in following this up. It is right that wrongly convicted postmasters get the justice and the compensation they deserve. I echo the wise words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). As a former postmaster, I ask the Minister to turn his attention to a decent investment in the branch network and a decent remuneration and commission package for postmasters, who, operating a stand-alone post office,

cannot make it work at the moment because the package is not good enough. Slightly cheekily, may I also ask the Minister to wish my constituents Jigen and Nisha Patel all the best for tomorrow, when I will formally open the new post office in Sheringham on the north Norfolk coast?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend speaks as one of the few experienced sub-postmasters who have taken a seat in this place, and I appreciate his work in this area. We are looking at the future sustainability of the Post Office, and that will require investment. It is important that we get to a position where there is a bright future for the network and for the sub-postmasters who work in it and they have sustainable businesses. I am keen to liaise with him as we move towards that position. Of course, I congratulate the Patels on their new post office and hope the launch goes well.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Two of my constituents who were innocent victims of this scandal recently contacted me to raise their concerns about the appropriateness of Herbert Smith Freehills as what they describe as aggressive litigators of compensation claims on behalf of the Post Office, as well as concerns about the level of Government and independent oversight of the process operated by the Post Office with public money. Could the Government look into this situation again and report back to the House?

Kevin Hollinrake: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will be happy to look into the situation. The solicitors involved in this are Dentons and Addleshaw Goddard. We believe they are the right people to help us make sure these claims are fair and to facilitate negotiations between the two parties, but I am keen to talk to him about any issue he wants to raise with me.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituent served a prison sentence as a result of a prosecution by the Post Office. His conviction was subsequently overturned on the recommendation of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, but because he pleaded guilty on the advice of the National Federation of SubPostmasters, the Post Office is saying that his case is not a malicious prosecution, and therefore he is not included in the scheme and is not to be compensated. It is only offering him what it would cost the Post Office to defend his case if he were to take it to court. Can the Minister say whether my constituent will be included in the schemes he has outlined today?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very sorry to hear what has happened to the hon. Gentleman's constituent; that must have been a devastating situation for him. I do not think it would be appropriate for me to talk about individual cases on the Floor of the House today—I do not think that Madam Deputy Speaker would want me to do so—but I am very happy to liaise with the hon. Gentleman. If he writes to me, we can take that up on his behalf.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the work of his predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). The emotional toll that this tragedy has had on the Horizon victims and their

[Margaret Ferrier]

families is devastating, particularly those who passed away before they were exonerated, one of whom was a constituent of mine. New evidence has revealed that the Post Office-Horizon help desk was a toxic and resentful environment where racism was reportedly a daily occurrence. What investigation have Ministers made of that workplace culture and how it may have hindered the system error from coming to light sooner?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out the emotional distress that many people felt, and the fact that some people have passed away while this process has been ongoing, a point also made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). To be clear, any compensation can, of course, be paid to family members in that situation—a situation that, clearly, is entirely unacceptable. The Sir Wyn Williams inquiry will look at all the different factors at play in terms of why this happened, what could have been done, what should have been done, and who is responsible. I am absolutely determined to make sure that we learn the lessons from it, but not just that: if people can be held to account for what they have done, they should be, and I will do everything I can to make sure that they are.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his statement.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2023

Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023

Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Act 2023

Seafarers' Wages Act 2023

Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Act 2023

UK Infrastructure Bank Act 2023

Investment Security Unit: Scrutiny

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Darren Jones, Chair of the Select Committee, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement; these should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Government Ministers. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.23 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I rise today to give a statement on behalf of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in respect of our memorandum of understanding with the Government on scrutiny of the use of powers contained in the National Security and Investment Act 2021. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the time to do so.

As the House knows, the National Security and Investment Act established a new statutory regime for Government scrutiny of, and intervention in, investments for the purposes of protecting national security. The Act applies to a wide range of sectors, which themselves are broadly defined, and—unlike in other countries—covers all transactions, not just those involving foreign investment. The investment security unit was then established within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to operationalise the Act. At that stage, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was the decision maker.

When the Bill was going through the House, the Government confirmed their preference that scrutiny of the use of these powers should be done by my Committee. There was a debate in this House and in the other place about whether a departmental Select Committee had sufficient processes, people and protections in place to scrutinise secret information, and right hon. Members from the Intelligence and Security Committee understandably argued that their Committee was best placed to do that work. However, the Government were not minded to accept amendments for a statutory regime of scrutiny in the Bill, nor to change their position on which Committee should have oversight of the regime. As such, Ministers committed to entering into a memorandum of understanding with my Committee to set out how information would be made available to allow us to do our work.

While negotiating that memorandum, my Committee established a new National Security and Investment Sub-Committee and appointed special advisers. We are also grateful to the House for providing us with national security subject specialist staff with relevant levels of security clearance. In addition, we undertook a short study visit to the United States to understand how congressional oversight of that country's equivalent regime is conducted.

I am pleased to inform the House that the memorandum of understanding between the Government and my Committee has now been agreed, and that we have published it today in our report. I will not test the patience of the House by reading out the whole memorandum, but I will just make two points. First, it has been agreed that scrutiny will largely be done in private and, in so far as it relates to individual transactions, will be done retrospectively following any appeal or legal challenge. This was agreed to prevent actual or perceived political interference in quasi-judicial decision making, and means that we operate in line with our counterparts in the United States. Secondly, the bulk of our work will focus on the effect of the legislation on investment in the United Kingdom and the effectiveness of Government operations.

When the Committee decides that it wants to understand individual transactions in more detail, we will be able to request information from the Government via a private explanatory memorandum, which we will not publish. If the Committee wishes to see more sensitive information that is not contained in the explanatory memorandum, I as Chair of the Committee will be able to request access to such information, and will be briefed on equivalent to Privy Council terms or by notification under the Official Secrets Act. Lastly, while the recent machinery of Government changes have resulted in the investment security unit moving to the Cabinet Office and the decision maker now being the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Government have confirmed that they still intend for scrutiny of the Act to be undertaken by my Committee and, soon, its successor Committee on the basis set out in today's report and the letter from the Minister received by other relevant Committees.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani):

I welcome this report, especially paragraph 11. We have always welcomed scrutiny of our decisions. As the hon. Member rightfully pointed out, the investment security unit has left the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but I am still responsible and we now sit in the Cabinet Office. Obviously, we want to support businesses to ensure that investment in the UK continues, while also protecting our national security.

I wondered whether the hon. Member could reflect on the fact that the NSI Act is a leading investment screening regime, and that we have good relationships with like-minded partners through which we share best practice and help other countries with similar regimes. Perhaps he could also comment on when I will be in front of him and his Select Committee, because we do not shy away from scrutiny. Finally, perhaps he would like to indulge the House and thank all of the investment security unit staff who worked with us on the unit and on securing this MOU.

Darren Jones: I thank the Minister for her question. Of course, for a long time, she was a member of my Committee. She pushed me quite hard to ensure that we got very effective scrutiny of this legislation, so I look forward to working with her collaboratively on the exchange of information as it relates to our interests as a Select Committee.

The Minister invites me to thank her officials, as well as my Clerks on the Select Committee, and I should do so. It took, I think, nearly 13 months to get to this

point, sometimes with some frustration, but we got there. However, much of the work has been done and much of the detail has been agreed at length by our officials and Clerks, and we are very grateful to them for their contributions.

As for when the Minister will be summoned to my Select Committee, it is unusual that people are keen to come and be cross-examined by me and my colleagues on the Committee, but we look forward to welcoming her in due course.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Can I thank my hon. Friend for his statement, but also say how disappointed I am with it—not from his point of view, but from the Government's? The Intelligence and Security Committee, which I sit on, is the only Committee that can look at the highest classification of information. My hon. Friend even admits that, under this process, he might be able to be given some information, but not all. It would be down to the Secretary of State. The memorandum says that the ISU is going to the Cabinet Office. Has he had an indication or clarification of which bit of the Cabinet Office? If it is the National Security Secretariat, that is already under the remit of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Darren Jones: I am in the unusual circumstance, as a member of the Opposition, of having to put the Government line to my right hon. Friend. I merely recognise, as he will know from our extensive conversations, that it has always been the case, in line with the Osmotherly rules for Select Committees, that we do not have a statutory power to summon information, as he does on the Intelligence and Security Committee, but that there is a presumption that information will be shared with us. He will know that, if that information is not exchanged in a timely and ready fashion for us to do our work, the Committee will escalate those issues via the Committee, the usual channels or on the Floor of the House. As to my right hon. Friend's question on where the unit resides, it resides in the Cabinet Office. I assume it is within the National Security Secretariat. I think he is therefore suggesting that that means the ISC has oversight. I know full well that he and his colleagues will make use of their powers to try to request information from the Government in their work.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement and recognise that a huge amount of work has gone into it, including with the Government. I thank him for the engagement he has had with my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the Chairman of the ISC, of which I, too, am a member. I know that my right hon. Friend would be here if he could be.

If I may, I will put to the hon. Gentleman what the problem with the arrangement might be. He has said already that arrangements are to be made for the viewing of material that would normally be at a higher classification than members of his Committee would be able to see, but those arrangements as set out in the memorandum are clearly described as "exceptional". Is it not the case that the sub-committee of his Committee that he will set up to deal with this material is likely to deal with that sort of classified material on a routine basis? Is there not an advantage in having staff and members of

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

a committee who are used to dealing with this type of material? Through no fault of their own, neither his Committee nor its staff will be used to that.

Darren Jones: There is an interesting question there, to which none of us knows the answer: how routine will it be for us to have to look at either commercially sensitive or national security-sensitive information about individual transactions? From our study visit to the United States, it seemed that most of the transactions were operationalised, and had not become political or been escalated to a committee level, because the issues were seen to be sensible, small or below de minimis thresholds.

There will be examples where there is more political interest in a particular transaction. In the past year, for example, where the 2021 Act has been operational, the vast majority of the notifications that my Committee has received have not warranted our having to look at the national security information. For some cases, such as Newport Wafer Fab, the industrial implications of that decision will warrant our looking at that information in more detail. Under this memorandum of understanding, we will request that information when we are permitted to do so—after the period of judicial review and appeal has closed—so that we may understand whether the Act is being used in the way it is supposed to be used, without deterring investment in the interests of workers and business in this country.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman refers to staff. As I said in my statement, the House has kindly provided the Committee with additional staff, who are national security specialists and have a range of security clearances. In the MOU, there are procedures and processes for the handling, holding, storage and use of information, both between my Committee and my Clerks, but also where necessary within Government facilities.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Just to endorse the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), I know that the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) has behaved in an admirably collegiate manner throughout. On the issue of exceptional access to highly sensitive information, the MOU makes clear that members of the Committee may have sight of that information, but they will not be able to retain it or analyse it, and the Committee will not have staff who can keep that information, report back on it and advise the Committee's members once they have been able to analyse it. That is in contrast to the ISC, is it not, which has all those things. Is that really appropriate? How does he feel he will navigate that paradox?

Darren Jones: We have to give the MOU a whirl and see how it works. I understand the right hon. Member's concerns. My only point is that I am not sure there will be lots of documents we will want to host in a safe special location for us to keep returning to. Our job broadly is to look at the implications for investment and for business in the UK. When something is escalated from a transactional basis to a political level, we need to understand why Ministers have made their decisions.

As much as I would like it to be the case, it is not for the Committee to be the Government, and it is not for us to make different decisions from Ministers. Ministers—the right hon. Member's colleagues—are empowered to make the decisions they make. It is for my Committee merely to have oversight and scrutiny of how they have come to those decisions and to recommend improvements, should the Committee see fit to do so. While the right hon. Gentleman's point is correct factually—the ISC has a whole range of assets and processes and people who are not available to my Committee—I am not sure in practice how much of that information would need to be processed in that way for us to do an effective job of scrutinising the use of the legislation.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the work that has been done to get the MOU agreed. I am sure the hon. Gentleman's Committee will do important work in this space, but like my fellow members of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I think this is frankly an unsatisfactory situation. I hope the Government will listen to the points that have been made today. Will the Chair of the Select Committee be willing to report back to the House on how these processes are operating? For the reasons given, it seems impractical for his Committee to give the detailed scrutiny that is needed.

Darren Jones: I hope the right hon. Member recognises that, albeit I have been in the House for the short period of six years, I am not a timid politician. If I am blocked or prevented from doing the work I have been asked to do by the House, I will make it clear that is the case. I am happy to come back to the House as and when appropriate to report on the scrutiny of the Committee. As the Bill was passing through the House, I and my Committee were, to be honest, fairly ambivalent about which Committees did the work and on what basis. We were open to other Committees and colleagues making their case, but ultimately the Government have made the decision, and we have responded to that and set up our processes in the best possible way. I reassure her that if they do not work well enough, I will certainly be back here to make that case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement.

Backbench Business

World Down Syndrome Day

1.36 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered World Down Syndrome Day.

I am grateful to have secured this debate, and I thank colleagues from all parties for their support in being able to do so. Two days ago I was honoured and privileged to be able to speak on behalf of the United Kingdom at the United Nations in New York on the 12th World Down Syndrome Day. It was an acknowledgement of the United Kingdom's role as the country that has been the first to legislate in this area, of which we should be extremely proud. It was important that we took that opportunity to make the case.

When we passed the Down Syndrome Act 2022, it was a recognition of the strength of our electoral system. With the first-past-the-post system, whatever its handicaps, we are real constituency MPs with real constituents, and the fact that we are exposed to the complex problems they have enables us to be responsive to their needs and them to know who to go to when they need help with the problems they face. I also think that passing this legislation was a recognition of something we do not always do as politicians. One of the intrinsic problems in a democratic system is that we tend to get more credit for dealing with a crisis than preventing one. One of the key elements of this legislation is that it shows that Parliament can anticipate problems before they become a serious crisis-ridden issue. I will come back to that, if I may.

I thank all the charities associated with Down syndrome for the work they have done since the passage of the legislation, and I thank all those voluntary groups who helped with the consultation. I particularly thank the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, not least for its support for our function in Parliament, which I was unable to attend due to being in New York. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) who stood in so expertly to chair such a successful event.

The theme for World Down Syndrome Day this year was “With Us Not For Us”, and thinking about legal capacity and supported decision making is incredibly important.

We all expect and take for granted that we can make decisions about our lives—from where we live and whom we live with to what we study and where we work—and because we take these choices for granted, we must not forget that other people do not necessarily have the ability to do so. It is therefore absolutely right that people with Down syndrome are involved in all the decisions that affect their lives.

As I said when I was in New York, when a child is born with an extra copy of their 21st chromosome, they enter a different path in life from the rest of the population and so, inevitably, do their families, who will face different challenges. Those challenges come, as we all know, in the form of medical problems, educational needs and long-term care challenges. The consequential change in life expectancy was one of the main reasons that we passed the legislation in the first place. I believe that every individual with Down syndrome has the same right to life, quality of life, dignity and independence that the rest of the population take for granted.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the right hon. Member on today's Backbench Business debate and the Act that he got through Parliament. Whether a child attends a special educational needs and disabilities-specific school or a mainstream school with SEND support is not dependent on any particular condition or diagnosis, but dependent on where the child's needs can be best met. Children with Down syndrome can thrive in mainstream education, so does the right hon. Member agree that increasing awareness of the condition among education professionals, parents and all children is important in ensuring that children with Down syndrome have access to the right learning environment for them?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point, because we can pass as much legislation as we like, but if the professionals at the sharp end, who are required to implement any changes or guidance, do not have sufficient understanding of the problem they are facing, we are all at a deficit in our response. I think the issue of professional education is so important not just for teachers, for whom it obviously is important, but for the medical profession, the social work profession and those involved in local government, who will deal with some of those issues relating to care, particularly long-term care. I think it is an extremely important issue.

I was able in the UN debate to show how the United Kingdom has a very proud record in legislation in this general area. The UK has a long-standing tradition of ensuring that the rights and liberties of disabled people are protected. We ratified the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities in 2019. Internationally, our disability inclusion and rights strategy sets out the ambition to embed disability inclusion across all our diplomacy, policy and programmes. The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people in England, Wales and Scotland from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. We also have the Mental Capacity Act 2005, covering England and Wales, to ensure that every attempt is made to support someone to make decisions about their own lives, and that of course includes people with Down syndrome.

I would like, if I may, to say a word about the Down Syndrome Act and remind us why we passed this legislation. Primarily, it was about empowerment. The Act legislates not for Down syndrome, but for people with Down syndrome. It requires the Government in England to produce Down syndrome-specific guidance relating to health, social care, education and housing services. I hope that Members from Scottish and Welsh constituencies may be able to update the House on how this legislation is being adapted and implemented there. I will come back, if I may, to the point about its being Down syndrome-specific, because I have some concerns that that may be being lost in some parts of the consultation process.

It is important to remind ourselves about the legislation. Under the Act, public authorities such as hospitals, schools or social care providers cannot ignore the guidance when commissioning and delivering services. The guidance must set out what the unique needs of people with Down syndrome are, and what public authorities should be doing to ensure that the support needs of people with Down syndrome are met to enable them to live fulfilling lives. I will come back to this element of the guidance, because one of the issues we discussed in Committee—this has been a controversial issue in this

[Dr Fox]

House in relation to other legislation—is when does the guidance become instruction. If Ministers are issuing guidance that is in effect instruction, surely that should be laid before the House of Commons so that we can recognise the importance of that and scrutinise how ministerial authority is being used.

I think that for too long there have been too few levers available for individuals, families and their advocates, including us as Members of Parliament when it comes to getting fair treatment for our constituents with Down syndrome. After all, what is the point of rights in legislation if we cannot enforce them and if there is no mechanism to do so? That was one of the key elements we discussed during the passage of the legislation, and it led to two very important and, I think, innovative changes: the first is on parliamentary scrutiny, and the second is on individual empowerment.

One of the problems we have faced before is that, when Ministers issue guidance, there is very little ability for parliamentary Select Committees to take direct oversight of it. One of the principles we established—and I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is now the Secretary of State for Education, for her support in establishing this principle—is that if the guidance is in fact instruction, the guidance would be laid before Parliament, which of course means that the Education Committee, the Health and Social Care Committee and local government can all look at it in real time.

One of the things we considered was whether we would have to put a sunset clause on this legislation to enable Parliament to look at it again. The mechanism that we decided on—I think rightly—in this House and in the other place was that, in publishing the guidance, we would have real-time oversight, because when our constituents bring problems to us, we are all able to write to the Chair of whatever Committee it is and ask them to look into that particular aspect of how the Down Syndrome Act is functioning. That gives us, as Members of Parliament, a lever that we did not have before when we simply wrote a letter to a Minister and hoped for the best, which is not sufficient to implement the rights of our constituents in the way that I think we envisaged during the passage of the Act.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): This will be very important for people in the Down syndrome community who believe they are being diagnostically overshadowed and that things are being missed. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that that is particularly important when enforcing someone's rights in relation to healthcare?

Dr Fox: It is. Diagnostic overshadowing is very important, in that we should not miss things in people with Down syndrome because we are looking the other way, or we are distracted by the diagnosis and not looking sufficiently at the person. Greater professional education—and this goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier)—is a key part of the empowerment of the individuals for whom this legislation was produced. I know from my own medical education that there was not a great deal of it that involved us learning about specific needs. For the medical profession, the sort of overlooking that the

hon. Gentleman describes is a real risk if the thought is not there that someone may see a different position from the one they should because of the very overshadowing that he describes. I imagine he may enlighten us further on that particular issue, and I hope he will because it is a real issue that needs to be examined fully.

The second important change in our legislation was that we included in it the need for a named individual on the new integrated care boards to be responsible for the implementation of the Down Syndrome Act. A very senior Member of this House said to me during the passage of the Bill in Committee, “Do the Government realise the floodgates that they may be opening in agreeing to this?” I said that I was not sure, but that it really was not my problem. I think this is a tremendous innovation, because all too often we have an anonymised bureaucracy when it comes to the delivery of the things that Parliament intends. We can vote for things in this House and, with taxpayers' money, we can fund them, but if we do not know who is responsible for the delivery in our own locality, it becomes difficult for us as Members of Parliament to know who to get in touch with.

The de-anonymisation of the civil service, which is something I have long and profoundly believed in doing, received its first outing in that Act. It may be a by-product—in my mind it was not that; it was an essential principle—but none the less it is extremely important. With this new system, for the first time, individuals, families and advocates for people with Down syndrome will know who is responsible. For once, there will be a named person in our system who people can turn to for either assistance or redress, depending on the nature of the problem. I hope we will extend that principle further in the provision of public services. For too long in this country, taxpayers have provided the funding, but they do not have accountability in the delivery mechanisms of those public services. It is, in many ways, a quiet revolution that I hope this Act will usher in. It is a principle and a precedent that has been much understated in the interpretation of what Parliament has done.

The guidance itself has been subject to long and detailed consultation, and I look forward to the draft publication in the summer. The Government face a number of challenges with this, which are worthy of debate. One question that was frequently raised in both Committee and the House was, “What about those with problems similar to those with Down syndrome; are we effectively creating a ladder of preferment in the provisions of public services?” Quite wisely, the Minister at the time said that it would be reasonable to consider those with overlapping problems at the same time as we were looking at the implementation of the Act. I say gently, however, that while that is absolutely right, we must also remember that the Act is specific to Down syndrome. When it comes to Down syndrome there is no doubt about the diagnosis, and unlike many other conditions where there are overlapping symptoms and signs to consider, there is no doubt about it. Down syndrome is not a subset of other conditions or of learning disabilities, although on a Venn diagram there will be a huge overlap; it is a specific condition and we must regard it as such.

I would like the Government to consider some specific areas, one of which relates to education rather than health. This is a formal request to Ministers to add Down syndrome as a separate category to the annual

school census. Why? Because there is currently no Down syndrome-specific school data available, including numbers, location, or educational settings, because individuals with Down syndrome are included only in the general special educational needs and disability school numbers. If we are to have specific legislation, it makes sense to have specific data with which to interpret the success of its implementation. Children with Down syndrome in the education system will have specific speech and language issues, significant fine and gross motor delay, cognitive delay, hearing loss, visual issues—we detailed that on Second Reading—social and emotional needs, and specific and unique learning profiles associated with Down syndrome. Some of those conditions will be shared with other syndromes and medical conditions, but many will be specific to Down syndrome. If we are not to get the overshadowing problem, we must be clear about what we need to know about this.

In New York I was able to set out the sort of cases and advances that we have made in this country by being able to utilise a range of tools that enable people with Down syndrome to make more decisions for themselves. As we have a better understanding, for example among social workers and community medical staff, we are increasingly able to deploy those tools to ensure that those who have a voice—a voice that would not necessarily traditionally be recognised in our system—are able to make more decisions for themselves. That was at the heart of what the UN 12th World Down Syndrome Day meant.

I do not wish to speak any longer than necessary and take up colleagues' valuable time, so I will end with this quote from Heidi Carter, who I have come to know increasingly well. She is a valiant campaigner for Down syndrome rights, and she states:

"I have shown everyone that Down syndrome is not something to be scared of and that people with Down syndrome live happy, amazing, fulfilled and independent lives!"

Congratulations to her and her husband on their marriage. I wish them well. She said:

"We are not going to give up. I think that all human life is valuable and should be treated with respect however many chromosomes we have!"

I do not believe there is a single one of us in this House who would not agree with that sentiment.

1.55 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on securing this debate, and on the passage of his Act. I enjoyed his contribution this afternoon, advocating for individuals in the Down syndrome community. I assure him that I was at the parliamentary event on Wednesday, and there were people from Scotland down in the Lobby discussing some of those issues. It was a privilege to be there. It is also a privilege to be an elected representative, and one of the privileges that come with that is that we meet those we represent who speak truth to power. On Saturday, my constituent, Danielle Urie, came to see me at my Ibrox surgery. She asked me to participate in this debate, which is why I am here this afternoon. I asked Danielle to write to me about some of the things she wanted to say, and after the exchange I had with the right hon. Gentleman about diagnostic overshadowing, I am afraid that, sadly, there is an example of that coming up.

Danielle is currently going through the complaints procedure with the health service in Scotland to discuss some of this. I asked her, and her son Steven, to go through their experiences, and I will read what Danielle sent to me last night:

"My name is Danielle Urie. If my son Steven could speak, I'm sure this is what he would say. 'My name is Steven I am 11 years old. From 2019 to 2021 I was diagnostically overshadowed by doctors which resulted to damage in my body that can never be reversed, while sitting in chronic pain and bleeding for two years. I am now left with a permanent stoma and my large bowel being completely removed. During this time I had been treated with no respect, and left with no dignity.' If Steven was a typical child who could voice for himself I don't think any of this would have happened. I want you to all know the catastrophic consequences that can happen with diagnostic overshadowing, because it's real and it happens more than you all think. To have no control on what happens with your child's healthcare is terrifying. I don't want my child or any child in fact to be added to the statistics of people with Down's syndrome dying as a result of being diagnostically overshadowed."

I want to thank Danielle for having the bravery to write to a Member of Parliament to share that particular experience.

The right hon. Gentleman invited us to talk about what is happening in other devolved nations, and I have some constructive criticisms about what is happening in Scotland. I do not think that everything is wrong with what the Scottish Government are doing, but I have some comments to make. The Scottish Government's position is that they take a wider view and are committed to introducing the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity Bill as part of their programme for government. There are opportunities there. In delivering the Bill, the Scottish Government want to improve opportunities, outcomes and support for people with Down's syndrome.

There will be a consultation on the Bill later this year. I will certainly be assisting Danielle, and any others, as a part of that. It will provide an opportunity for people to view the policy options that could be included in the draft Bill, including whether it should establish a commissioner. As part of their scoping work, the Scottish Government ran events with a wide range of Scotland's disabled people-led organisations and national charities. The Scottish Government are working towards a human rights-based approach to ensure the Bill is fully co-designed with people who have lived experiences. It is very important, when shaping legislation, that people with those lived experiences are involved from the outset.

I would like to see the words "Down's syndrome" included in the title of the Bill. I think that would be welcomed by those who came down from Scotland to the event in Parliament on Tuesday. Why do I think that is important? People with Down's syndrome are more likely to be born with a heart condition and more likely to get leukaemia. People in the Down's syndrome community are more prone to infections and thyroid problems, and more susceptible to eye and hearing problems. We want to ensure that those with Down's syndrome get extra health checks, for example, and have access to speech therapy. It is very important that people with Down's syndrome have those opportunities. Those are some of the reasons why I want the Down's syndrome community in Scotland have the words "Down's syndrome" in the title of the Bill. I will be working with Danielle and others to ensure that that is the case.

2.1 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): First, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) for securing the debate and for all the work he did to ensure the Down Syndrome Act 2022 became law.

During our lifetime, there has been a significant change in attitude towards Down syndrome. Undoubtedly, there is still more that can be done to improve the quality of life and opportunities of people with Down syndrome, but as we mark the 18th anniversary of the first World Down Syndrome Day, we should not forget the progress that has been made in understanding the condition and supporting those with Down syndrome to be treated fairly so they are able to live full and productive lives.

I speak with personal experience. My father had an elder brother, Donald, who had Down syndrome. I was only told of his existence when I was 27 years old and pregnant with my second child. Donald died in 1946, aged about 25. He spent all his life in an institution, which was standard practice at the time. My father did not talk about his brother. He found it too painful. My mother explained to me that when my father was a small child, my grandmother had taken him with her every month to visit his brother in the institution and the experience had traumatised him.

When I spoke during the Down Syndrome Bill debate last year, I referenced the BBC series “Call the Midwife”, which documented attitudes towards Down syndrome and how they started changing in the 1950s and 1960s as people with Down syndrome were able to take an active part in their communities. Not only have attitudes changed, but life expectancy has increased dramatically in recent decades from 25 years in the 1900s to 60 years today. Medical science has advanced and people can live extremely healthy and long lives, and make a great contribution to our society.

I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions of people with Down syndrome to their local communities and to our society as a whole.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on securing the debate. We are all encouraged by the situation. What comes to my mind is a young gentleman called James Martin, the 31-year-old who starred in the roaring success, “An Irish Goodbye”. He has gone from working in Starbucks to living his dream by winning a globally recognised award. Most importantly, he has never let his disability get in the way of goals and achievement. Does the hon. Lady agree that James is a true role model to all individuals out there who feel that society restrains them due to their disability, and reminds them that the world is their oyster—or in this case, their Oscar?

Jo Gideon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely correct.

In Stoke, the Stoke and Staffordshire Downs Syndrome Social Group was set up in 2016 by a family in my constituency after their son was born with Down syndrome and the couple walked away from hospital with just a factsheet about the disorder. Today, the group meets regularly in Birches Head and is making a difference to

the lives of more than 50 families by organising regular trips and activities, as well as supporting families emotionally and connecting them with wider support groups.

I would also like to highlight the great WorkFit programme for its role in making workplaces more inclusive. WorkFit is an employment programme that matches places and supports individuals with Down syndrome into work, with more than 1,000 individuals successfully accessing the service to date. In my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central, I was delighted to hear that the programme supported Grace into her role at Dunelm distribution centre, where she works dealing with returns from customers. She works two days a week and really enjoys being part of a great team who are very supportive. She uses her computer skills to process returns from customers and is very proud of her job.

Last week’s Budget outlined ways in which we would like to see a greater proportion of working-age people in employment, with a specific emphasis on supporting disabled people into work. One thing I would like to see is an improvement in ensuring that public transport services are available for travelling to and from work, so that a lack of access is not a barrier to that aim. Indeed, while it is wonderful to hear stories like Grace’s, according to the Down’s Syndrome Association, people with Down syndrome often face barriers and prejudice, lack of opportunities, low expectations, stereotyping and other negative attitudes. A study by Mencap found that 62% of adults with learning disabilities in the UK want to work, but only 6% have a paid job.

Everyone should have the right to work. People who have Down syndrome want to work for the same reasons as everyone else: to earn their own money, learn new skills, meet new people, feel valued, contribute to society, and have the chance to be more independent. Work is important for so many reasons and is a key part of our personal ambitions. For employers and their workforce, being equipped with the knowledge and understanding of how to better support a colleague with the condition is at the heart of the matter. In fact, it is key to achieving an inclusive work environment.

The same goes for education. The majority of children with disabilities in developing countries are currently out of school, while many of those enrolled are not in learning. To ensure that all children have access to quality education, education policies and practices must be inclusive of all learners, encourage the full participation of all, and promote diversity as a resource rather than as an obstacle. I was listening to an interview with a teacher recently, who said that she had seen such a difference in her class after moving from retrospectively altering her lesson plans for children in the class with Down syndrome, to thinking about how she can make a plan that includes the needs of all her pupils from the beginning. When we think about successful inclusion, it is about how are we supporting teachers to include and value everyone from the start, as opposed to adapting and modifying in retrospect.

The theme of this year’s World Down Syndrome Day is “With Us Not For Us”. I think that reflects my point well: a move from the outdated charity model of disability to working with others to treat them fairly so that they have the same opportunities as everyone else.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope you will forgive me, but my constituent Ed Daly is in the Public Gallery with his

mum, Jane. They spoke at the event on Tuesday in Parliament and they are fantastic advocates for this cause. Everything my hon. Friend says absolutely sums up what they have been saying to me. Will she, as I do, pay tribute to them?

Jo Gideon: I absolutely do pay tribute to them. I cannot see them in the Public Gallery, but it is wonderful that they are here to listen to the debate and to hear all the support there is for them in the House.

Support in decision making is really good. We all need help from people who know us and want the best for us. But people should have the right to make the final decision, the right to dignity and individuality, and the right to be in control of their lives.

2.9 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) for securing this important debate on a subject close to my heart. It is important in such debates to talk about real people. There is a real person in Ashfield called Jossie May. She is seven years old and has Down syndrome. Jossie's family want the world to see the real Jossie. Is Jossie different? Yes, she is. She is beautiful, funny, clever, friendly, happy, and all the things that I want to be but unfortunately am not. She is a role model to us all, so I guess she is different. Jossie's family know that she will face certain barriers when she gets older, but with the right support in place, Jossie can achieve many great things and make a fantastic contribution to our society. Why should she not be allowed to do that? She should be.

Gone are the days when we would hide away children with Down syndrome, and thank goodness for that. Why should we hide them away? They have as much right to enjoy life as we do, but it is up to us as a civilised society to ensure that we remove as many obstacles as we can. With the right education and support, young Jossie could go on to lead a happy, contented and independent life where she can work and look after herself. Is that not what we all want?

Jossie's family are aware that we have made great strides in education over the past 30 years, but we still have a long way to go with Down syndrome. In the right settings and with the right support, whether in mainstream or special schools, surely we can do a little more to help members of our Down syndrome community. We want a world where we do not have to fight so hard for people such as Jossie. There also needs to be acknowledgment that, like any other human being, those with Down syndrome have different levels of ability. We are all different, and have different abilities. Some will be capable of living independently with some support; some will never be able to do that. We need to look at each person as an individual and ensure that they are supported by the correct decision making.

Great improvements have been made in access to education, but when a person with Down syndrome leaves full-time education, their employment opportunities are few and far between. We have a great project in Ashfield called the Rumbles cafe, where young people with learning disabilities are trained to work in a café. It is a life-changing experience for many young people, and provides a valuable service to our community, but the café faces an uncertain future, as the local council is bickering over the terms of the lease. It is truly a shocking situation.

Attitudes need to change. It should be not all about money but about outcomes. There also needs to be much more support post education. So many parents end up with a young adult who has little opportunity to integrate with their local community on a day-to-day basis. It is truly shocking. Every person deserves to be immersed in a community where they can get involved.

We need more research into health issues. There is a huge pocket of science within the Down syndrome community, such as on childhood leukaemia and Alzheimer's, to name just two issues. Imagine what answers could be sitting there undiscovered in the Down syndrome community. It is an interesting fact that the cure rate for acute myeloid leukaemia in children with Down syndrome is higher than that of the general population. We should be looking into that more.

Lastly—this should be the simplest of all—I would like better signposting in maternity care. The Positive About Down Syndrome support service has made great strides to improve that, but there is still more to be done. I know Jossie. According to her family, she is every kind of wonderful and deserves a wealth of opportunities. Let us make a world where that can happen.

I was at the event in this place just a few days ago. I saw room full of wonderful young people, full of talent and ambition, with loving and caring families. If we cannot make the world better for those young people, we should not be here in this place. I am confident that the Minister will make sure that we do that.

2.13 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this afternoon's debate. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) for securing it, for his groundbreaking work in this area and for his Bill, which was passed into law last year.

As we have heard, the theme of this year's World Down Syndrome Day is "With Us Not For Us"—apt recognition of the fact that people with disabilities have the right to be treated fairly and to have the same opportunities as everybody else, working with others to improve their lives. Nowhere is that exemplified more brilliantly than through the work of the world-famous, world record breaking Music Man project—a Southend-based education and performance service for people with physical and cognitive learning difficulties such as Down syndrome.

The Music Man project reverses perceptions around disability, including Down syndrome, on a scale rarely seen before. The project has been so successful that there are now regional centres across the United Kingdom and even around the world. None of that would have been possible without the incredible leadership and drive of the Government's disability and access ambassador for arts and culture, Southend's very own hero David Stanley BEM. He really does deserve a knighthood. David's mission in life has been to support people with learning difficulties to achieve what would once have been unthinkable. He is the living embodiment of, "With Us Not For Us".

David Stanley's students recently performed alongside the Massed Bands of His Majesty's Royal Marines in the Mountbatten festival of music at the Royal Albert Hall. A total of 15,000 people gave them a standing ovation over three performances. One such supporter

[Anna Firth]

was none other than His Majesty the King, who rose to his feet to applaud these incredible musicians. It was a remarkable moment and testament to the power of music to shine a light on a once forgotten society.

Quite rightly, in February this year, David Stanley received a special recognition award from the National Lottery for his work with the Music Man project. Everyone in Southend is incredibly proud of his work and that of these incredible musicians with Down syndrome who are achieving so much. Some will know that one of their astonishing achievements was to come out with a Christmas single, "Music is Magic", which made the top 10—it may have been at No. 10, but never mind. It was an amazing record, featured on BBC1's "Breakfast", Sky News, ITV's "Good Morning Britain" and across national radio and press. It was officially launched with a performance at the Painted Hall in Greenwich, and the Prime Minister was presented with his own copy by the Leader of the House. I took my team to Waterloo station where the musicians were performing. It was an incredible and joyous occasion to help them and to sing with them there.

Not content with just storming the charts here in the UK, the Music Man ambassadors—bandassadors—also stormed America on their recent concert tour to San Diego, where they performed onboard the iconic aircraft carrier the USS Midway. Their groundbreaking collaboration with the Royal Marines connects elite military musicians with people with learning disabilities, through the universal language of music. Last year, they also received four "yes" votes from the celebrity judges of "Britain's Got Talent". Simon Cowell described them as "like drinking a glass of happiness".

Watch this space.

I could go on about the project's incredible musical success. As I have said, it is the perfect example of "With Us Not For Us". The students are treated as fellow musicians and enjoy the same incredible opportunities to express themselves and share their talents. As a result, musicians with Down syndrome are now role models for their community and global ambassadors for the UK's accessible arts and culture. David Stanley himself says,

"Sometimes it feels as if I'm clinging on for the ride while they go on and make history."

In preparing for this debate, I contacted the ex-headmistress of one of our special schools in Southend, who is now the CEO of the SEN Trust. There is more we can do to support people living with Down syndrome. Jackie Mullan, a brilliant champion of education for people with disabilities, has shared with me her concerns about the lack of post-19 college options for people with Down syndrome in Southend. There should be more options for people leaving college, whether that be entering the world of employment or enjoying better daycare opportunities. Sadly, at the moment, those are few and far between in Southend and are difficult to access due to the pressures on social worker workloads. She has even heard reports of families who have waited over six weeks just for a phone call to be returned about the options available. There should be a review of the guidance issued, looking at what is and is not available. That must be improved. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that the Government are looking into that.

There is so much to celebrate about the Down syndrome community and the champions we have in Southend, including Jackie Mullan and David Stanley. They are heroes, but only because of the incredible passion, energy, excitement and enthusiasm of the students they look after.

2.20 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and I am pleased to see colleagues here who have come with their own experiences. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on securing the debate and I thank him for his work with his Bill.

We discuss lots of issues in this Chamber, often prompted, lobbied for or orchestrated by individuals who have the loudest voices, including those who organise the petitions we debate in Westminster Hall, which have to have 100,000 signatures. Those people know how to work the system, so this afternoon it is good to take part in a debate prompted by those whose voices have been heard less frequently over the years. Those voices sometimes belong to less able-bodied people or, as in this case, those who have Down syndrome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) spoke movingly about her own experiences; it was emotional for her to relate those experiences to us. She spoke about her father and his experience of having a brother who was left in care. There was a time when people with Down syndrome or other disabilities were always put into care. That was a terrible time and I am very pleased that we have now moved beyond that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) mentioned the caring role of parents who are able—or in some cases not able—to look after people who are suffering from these terrible conditions. We should pay tribute to them, especially those in the Public Gallery today. I have to admit that I could not undertake that role. I do not, unfortunately, have children, but I would find it very difficult to look after the day-to-day needs of anyone with any kind of disability. I will be honest and say that I could not do that. I pay tribute to my sister, who is undertaking a caring role at the minute. As I have explained to her, that is not something that I could do. Some people, like me, simply cannot do that.

Several years ago, I went to visit Saira and Anthony Hettiarachchi, who run the Dillon care home in West Hendon. Both Saira and Anthony are friends of mine. Saira was a Conservative councillor and worked in the sector for many years, meaning she was able to take some of those skills to her work at the council, including in children's services. During my visit, she introduced me to many of the people she looked after, perhaps because their parents were unable to do so or because Saira's care home was able to provide better care for them. She introduced me to a boy with Down syndrome called Michael, who did not have great verbal or other communication skills but could dance; actually, he danced rather well. He was a bit more like a cat than I am. He could dance and he was able to express himself. I was quite amazed at the time that someone who I thought would not be able to undertake that physical exertion was able to do that.

Later on, I saw Michael again, when I was at the St Joseph's Pastoral Centre in Hendon. I saw not only Michael but other children with Down syndrome. They

all seemed to communicate with each other, as they were winning awards, in their own special way. It was interesting to see because they were a group within the group and they were acting just like other children. There was no difference between them. It struck me that they were like anyone else, and had the same hopes and aspirations.

I have visited the Larches community trust in Edgware on several occasions, as I mentioned in my maiden speech, which was established by Linda Edwards. On one visit to the centre, I was asked, as many of us often are, to say a few words without any notice. I thought, "I'm going to take a risk, on this occasion. I'm going to say what I think." I know the Whips complain that I often not only say what I think but vote the way I think is appropriate, but on that occasion I thought I would take the chance, and it was worth it.

I spoke about people with Down syndrome and I said how they were coming out of the darkness and into the mainstream. An example I raised was about a person called Liam Barstow, who many people will know better as Alex Warner, the character in the soap opera, "Coronation Street". Liam was born with Down syndrome and was discovered by the producers of "Coronation Street" when they ran a workshop for actors with disabilities, called Breaking Through. They were so impressed with his abilities, they decided to create a role for him. One producer said, "It's not some politically correct thing. We found there a really great actor with a wonderful sense of timing."

I do not really watch soap operas, but on the occasions that I have seen "Coronation Street" I have been quite amused by some of lines that Liam has. We all know Roy Cropper is a character in "Coronation Street" who runs the local café. I would not call him a ladies man, but there was an occasion when he had two female acquaintances who were friends. Liam delivered a wonderful line, asking Roy if he was a "playa", which was a hilarious moment.

There have been other examples of people with Down syndrome in popular culture. Other people have spoken about their experiences today, which is good, and this is a very serious issue, but we need to highlight other ways in which people with Down syndrome have made great contributions. I particularly like the film, "The Peanut Butter Falcon". It is about a boy with Down syndrome who escapes from an assisted living facility and befriends a wayward fisherman on the run. The reason he escapes is that he wants to become a professional wrestler, which brings across to us that people with Down syndrome have hopes and aspirations, just like anyone else.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I have to raise the film "An Irish Goodbye", which I have watched twice. For those who have not seen it, it is set in a working farm in rural Northern Ireland and follows the reunion of estranged brothers Turlough, played by Seamus O'Hara, and Lorcan, played by James Martin, after the untimely death of their mother, hence the title of the film. Lorcan wants to continue working the land he grew up with, but Turlough decides he should go and live with their aunt on the other side of Ireland. To prevent that, Lorcan says he has a bucket list his mother wanted to complete and will only leave the farm if he and Turlough have completed every single wish on their mother's list—all 100 of them. I suggest people watch the film because it is a wonderful example of an individual who has broken free from stereotypes to become a commanding actor.

I highlight both productions because for many years people with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, have been written off and consigned to a lifetime on benefits. That is repugnant and I believe that both Liam and Jack have established themselves as actors.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, Jack used to be a barista, which he claims he would be quite happy to go back to, but I hope he continues to act. He has recently been filmed playing a harmonica in a bar, which shows he has a range of talents and interests. Maybe there should be a genre of films with leading characters with Down syndrome, but before I am criticised for singling people out, I would say viewers who watch these productions will experience empathy with these characters, get used to seeing their point of view and come away with an acceptance that they face additional hardships, but still have the same hopes and desires as everyone else. People with Down syndrome are not the others in society that they once were.

I have often thought we could include more people in what we do in this place, and the debate today is a good example of that. We should ensure that people who suffer from Down syndrome are given the opportunities they deserve, and that they come into the mainstream and perform their best role in life.

2.28 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): May I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox)? Further into my speech I may disagree with him slightly—it will be a gentle disagreement—but I totally acknowledge his knowledge and his passion for people with Down's syndrome. Unfortunately I was not able to make the reception on Wednesday, but I did manage to get my picture taken with the right hon. Member and tweet it out on World Down Syndrome Day; I think many of our constituents might have been quite surprised to see that.

It is always a pleasure to speak in these Thursday afternoon debates, because they are generally consensual and we really learn a lot. As the SNP spokesperson on disabilities I was not entirely sure whether I would be the right person to sum up in this debate, but I think I probably am, because of the passion that the people around me are exhibiting this afternoon. I will probably throw away my prepared speech now and just crib bits and pieces.

It is always a pleasure to follow Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). Everyone can be assured that he will assist his constituents to push the Scottish Government with their new Bill, because he is passionate about helping his constituents. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) spoke about her personal experience and about changing attitudes to Down's syndrome and life expectancy. As one of the older people speaking today, I can vouch for that: when I was younger it was very difficult to see anyone with Down's syndrome as we went about our daily living, but now things are very different right across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) spoke about real people; there cannot be many of us who have not met a real person with Down's syndrome. The hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) talked about the Music Man project and about the theme for this year's Down Syndrome Day, "With Us Not For Us"—a

[*Marion Fellows*]

motto and an expectation that we should all think about when we are dealing with people with disabilities. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) paid tribute to those who care. I am pretty sure that he, too, cares about lots of things, but I understand his reluctance to put himself out there as a carer.

The right hon. Member for North Somerset wanted to know more about what is going on in other areas. Before I get on to that issue, I might just get over the point on which we might differ slightly. Like other Members, I get briefings from lots of organisations for many debates in this House. Genetic Alliance has written to me with its concerns about the guidance on the right hon. Member's Act. It is worth just mentioning those concerns, which touch on the point that when Parliament passes a Bill there are often consequences that we do not see and a debate always opens up about what has not been included or what people think might have been included.

Given that people with Down's syndrome form friendships with people with other genetic conditions and meet them regularly, as they are accessing similar services, Genetic Alliance has concerns that perhaps more thought should be given to guidance for those with other conditions. However, I absolutely take on board what the right hon. Member and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West have said.

Dr Fox: I just want to clarify that the point of the Down Syndrome Act is not to exclude other conditions or other genetic conditions. It was specifically discussed on Second Reading and in Committee that where there is overlap, of course it makes sense to have common provision. However, Down syndrome is different: there is a bigger, defined population who have not just learning difficulty issues, but a whole range of very specific medical conditions that require specific remedies. As has regularly been pointed out, the life expectancy for someone with Down syndrome was 13 years when I was born, whereas it is now in the 60s. That is why it is important that we establish a beachhead for such conditions. Actually, I do not think we are in any disagreement whatever.

Marion Fellows: I am very relieved to hear that from the right hon. Gentleman, but I felt obliged to speak about the issue, because there are concerns. I would like the Minister to take on board those concerns from Genetic Alliance, because no one ever wants to pass a Bill that is seen as excluding or not actually helping other people—that is the main point of the briefing that I received today. As I say, I am very relieved not to be in dispute with the right hon. Member.

I want to talk a wee bit about the Scottish Government's position. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, they are taking a wider view of Down's syndrome in the Bill that they want to bring forward. One of the main differences in how the Scottish Government propose legislation is the way they look at the issues and consult very widely—there are many groups that they regularly consult on disabilities. They always use lived experience, which I think is the most important thing for people to take forward.

The Scottish Government have also looked at a human rights-based approach. That ties in very well with this year's World Down Syndrome Day theme, "With Us

Not For Us", because we need to look at human rights in their entirety, especially for people with Down's syndrome and for people with conditions that are different but that have similar difficulties. That is why the Scottish Government have committed to incorporating in Scots law the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities—always within their legislative competence, hopefully. I think this Government should also think about including that in Bills. I think we are going to have difficulties with human rights discussions, shall I say, in this Parliament going forward; I hope we do not, but I think we all have to realise that everyone has human rights and they have to be adhered to. We should not, in any size, shape or form, be looking to remove any of them from any group of people at all.

As has been said today, it is really important to remove as many barriers as we can for everyone, and especially for those who have Down's syndrome. It is really important that we look at what people can do, not at what they are not able to do—or not able to do yet. It is refreshing, and important, that people with Down's syndrome are involved in mainstream education. When I was a further education lecturer, I was involved with a college with many courses for young people who had left full-time education to continue learning. On that subject, there is a wonderful café in my constituency called Windmills. The preparations for it were first made in 2006 at a local school, Firpark high school. It has done great work over the years, and continues to do great work, in training young people with learning disabilities, including Down's syndrome, and teaching them how to gain qualifications so that they can work in other areas, but especially in the café.

Let me say in conclusion—because I am aware that I may be overrunning—that I find taking part in debates such as this interesting, educational and informative. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Somerset on all that he does, and I am sure many people have benefited, and will benefit, from his Act.

2.40 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I echo other Members in congratulating the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on securing this important debate. We all know what a passionate and—most importantly—effective campaigner he has been in supporting people with Down syndrome and their families. His Down Syndrome Act, which Opposition Members were proud to support, represents an important opportunity for us to make progress on delivering the support that people with Down syndrome deserve, so that they can lead as full and equal a life as everyone else.

Let me say as an aside that I think what the right hon. Gentleman is trying to do has important implications for wider public sector reform. There are many issues and problems that people have talked about for years; the question is, how do we make change? The right hon. Gentleman's mechanism in this instance is to use a specific Act providing for named individuals who are held accountable, and for guidance that actually secures change. However, there are other methods of securing changes in public services—for instance, through legal rights—and I am a strong champion of direct payments and personal budgets, which give people and their families the power to change those services. We need to focus on making a difference and putting the users of services

and their families at the heart of the system, making them equal partners in care. We will never get healthcare, education and work support right unless we do it in partnership with people.

I am a long-standing champion of the vision pioneered by the group Social Care Future, which consists of people who use services and their families: that we all want to live in the place we call home with the people and things we love, in communities where we look out for one another and where we can contribute, doing the things that matter the most to us—not what somebody else tells us we want to do or should do, but what we ourselves want to do. That is the vision that Opposition Members are championing. In the 21st century, and in what, despite all our problems, is still one of the richest countries in the world, it should not be seen as extraordinary, but the truth is, I am afraid, that for too many of the 47,000 people in the UK living with Down syndrome, it remains far from reality.

Members have rightly spoken of the progress that has been made, but I think it is also important to use this debate to demonstrate how much further there is to go. The first issue I want to raise is that of health and health inequalities, to which many Members have referred. We know that people with Down syndrome are more likely to experience problems with their hearts, bowels, hearing and vision, and have an increased risk of infections. I think it disgraceful that so often the outcomes are so poor for people with Down syndrome because of what is known as diagnostic overshadowing, when symptoms are ignored and put down to Down syndrome rather than being diagnosed properly and addressed.

There are two issues on which I think we should focus. The first is the need to ensure that children with Down syndrome have the regular check-ups they need with paediatricians and GPs. We know that too many families find those services too hard to access, and the current number of vacancies in the NHS—133,000—as well as all the other problems that people are experiencing when trying to see GPs and other doctors are having an impact on that. When she responds to the debate, will the Minister tell us when we will finally see the Government's workforce plan for the NHS? May I also cheekily ask her once again whether she will adopt Labour's plan to bring about the biggest expansion of the NHS workforce in its history, which we would pay for by scrapping the non-dom tax status? Members will understand that I want to put forward practical solutions today and to be realistic about the challenges, and that is what I intend to do.

Dr Fox: Does the hon. Lady accept that it is a question of not just the size of the workforce but their understanding of the problems? If in health, as in education and social care, the professionals are not aware of the difficulties faced by the population with Down syndrome, no number of extra professionals or services will make a real difference.

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Gentleman must have read the next line in my speech. Of course, it is not only an issue of staff shortages and vacancies. I think that the real issue, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier, is training. If people are not trained to understand an issue and to understand its manifestations, they will not be able to put it right. In some other areas, I have seen medical schools and universities pioneering new forms of training, in which those who have a condition

and their families become part of the training module to explain what the implications are. I hope that the Minister will tell us what action the Government are taking in this regard, and whether the guidance that will be issued will involve changes within medical schools or for nurses and other healthcare professionals.

The second area in which progress is needed is social care. It is, I believe, the biggest area in which the right support for people with Down syndrome is too often lacking. Whatever Conservative Members may say, I think it is important to understand the context in which the Down Syndrome Act will be working, and to take into account the difficult situation relating to social care. Just last week, research from the learning disability charity HfT revealed that nearly half the social care providers in England have been forced to close part of their organisations or hand back contracts to councils as a result of cost pressures in the last year. More than half a million people are awaiting a social care assessment, a review, or the start of a service or direct payment, and a survey conducted by the Down's Syndrome Association found that 43% of family carers said their adult child was in need of an assessment, with some waiting as long as two years for that basic service.

What all this means, of course, is that families tend to be left to pick up the slack, often having to leave their own jobs or reduce their hours because they cannot obtain the help that they need to look after their loved ones. The fact that there are 165,000 vacancies in the social care workforce is having an impact on the support that is available to families with Down syndrome. We need to address both the issue of the care workforce and wider reforms.

Last week, the *Health Service Journal* reported that there are due to be cuts in the money announced for social care reform in the 2021 White Paper. A sum of £500 million was set aside to improve the training and career progression of the care workforce, but the *Health Service Journal* said that that is going to be cut by half. It also said that the £300 million to better integrate housing, health and care is set to be cut, with cuts to the budgets for unpaid carers and the use of technology.

This is really important, because unless we join up services and support, people with Down syndrome will not be able to live the lives they choose. The issue of housing is critical. Just 28% of people with learning disabilities live in supported housing, yet we know that 70% of people with a learning disability want to change their current housing arrangements to give them greater independence. Will the Minister confirm whether those reports are true? Are the Government going to cut £250 million for improving the training of the social care workforce and £300 million from the budget to better integrate health, care and housing? [*Interruption.*] It is not a disrespectful question; it is a question that has a direct impact on the lives—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I said it was disappointing.

Liz Kendall: It is not disappointing; it is my job to hold the Government to account. I would like the Minister to answer that question.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) mentioned help to work, which I am passionate about. Work gives purpose, independence and dignity, but only

[Liz Kendall]

5.5% of adults with a learning disability in England were in paid employment as of 2020, yet 65% of people with learning disabilities say they want to go out and work. The hon. Member asked about what was happening in her constituency. I recently visited the Leicester Royal Infirmary, which is doing pioneering work with Ellesmere College, a college for students with special educational needs, to give them the skills and experience they need to get to work, with pioneering apprenticeships. I visited a young woman who was working in the hospital café. I asked her what she thought, and she said that her ambition now was to set up her own café and employ others. I think that shows that if people are given the chance and the support, real progress can be made.

The Down Syndrome Act presents a real opportunity for change. It creates a duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to relevant authorities on how to meet the specific needs of people with Down syndrome. That will cover many of the issues I have outlined, and I hope the Minister will update us on when it will start to make an impact on the ground. I understand that the call for evidence on the Act closed in November. When will we see the Government's response? We need to act quickly to make real progress to transform the lives of people with Down syndrome and ensure they can live the life they choose.

I would argue that wider action is needed to support the NHS and social care so that we have the investment and reform we need to improve lives, but I hope the Minister will address in detail my questions about the reports. I understand that the Government will produce an update on social care, possibly next week. Will the Minister answer my question and say whether the funds the Government promised will be available?

2.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) for securing the debate and for all his hard work over the years campaigning and supporting people with Down syndrome. I, too, attended the reception on the Terrace earlier this week. I met lots of people from around the country, some with Down syndrome, but with campaigners, supporters, friends and family. In particular, I pay tribute to the National Down Syndrome Policy Group and its founders, Ken and Rachael Ross, who are in the Public Gallery.

I had the pleasure of meeting the advisory team this morning in No. 10, where we held a roundtable with young people with Down syndrome. They certainly put my feet to the fire with their questions and the progress they want to see. They have joined us this afternoon, too. Florence, Harshi, Ed, Max, Fionn, Tommy, Charlotte, James, Heidi and Rula asked extremely difficult questions, and I have promised to update them on progress. That just shows the strength of feeling and the range of support from people around the country.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): As we celebrate World Down Syndrome Day and the achievement of those who suffer with Down syndrome, will the Minister join me in congratulating my constituent Jade Kingdom, who is now a Guinness world record holder as the first

person with Down syndrome to complete a sprint triathlon. She overcame her health conditions to achieve this and raised £30,000 for the North Devon Hospice.

Maria Caulfield: That is a fantastic achievement, and I congratulate Jade on her amazing ability. I wish I could do something similar.

Tuesday marked the 12th World Down Syndrome Day. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset was not able to join us on the day because he was at the UN in New York to showcase the work done in this Parliament. Many countries are now looking to us as they try to do something similar. He has not only changed the lives of people with Down syndrome in this country; he is making a difference globally, too.

As part of the World Down Syndrome Day celebrations, I am wearing my different socks to showcase the three strands of chromosome 21, which apparently look like socks and are the cause of Down syndrome. The socks highlight Down syndrome and the amazing contribution that the incredible people with Down syndrome make to our communities and society.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) spoke about his constituent Danielle, her son Steven and the very real issues of diagnostic overshadowing. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) spoke about her uncle Donald and how difficult it was for her family. She also spoke about what life was like in the past for people with Down syndrome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) spoke about Jossie, who I am sure has a wonderful future ahead of her. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke about David Stanley and the Music Man team, who cheer us up with their wonderful performances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) spoke about the dancing ability of his constituent Michael. He also spoke about Liam. I am a "Coronation Street" fan, and Liam is not currently at Roy's Rolls, but I look forward to his next episodes because he has a good sense of humour.

It is important to celebrate people with Down syndrome and to recognise the barriers they face. It was wonderful to see the actor James Martin win an Oscar for his brilliant performance, but we must not forget why we are here today.

The Down Syndrome Act became law in April 2022, and I will now update the House on its progress. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset and the Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), ensured the passage of the Act. We all have a responsibility to make sure it is not the end of the story by implementing the Act and getting the guidance out.

At Downing Street this morning, the young people asked when we will see those changes. We will deliver guidance for professionals working in health, social care, education and housing, to try to bring together support for people with Down syndrome. The guidance will set out tangible, practical steps that organisations should take to meet the needs of people with Down syndrome. It will raise awareness of the specific needs of people with Down syndrome, and it will bring them together with the relevant authorities to make support more easily accessible.

We launched our national call for evidence in July 2022, in the spirit of “With Us Not For Us,” and we heard from hundreds of people across the country. We had more than 1,000 responses on the needs and asks of the various communities. I thank everyone who responded or participated in the focus groups. It is thanks to them that we received so much evidence, which officials are now going through to analyse the data. We will shortly provide a summary of the key findings.

It is essential that people’s lived experience informs the development of the guidance, and that people with Down syndrome are involved at every stage. We will shortly set up a working group to oversee the development of the guidance. Once drafted, the guidance will be subject to further public consultation to make sure we have it absolutely right.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset asked some practical questions about the guidance, and we recognise that the issues and the services supporting people with Down syndrome sometimes overlap with the issues and the services supporting other people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties, which we need to consider. But I am absolutely clear that this guidance is about people with Down syndrome, because we want to help as many people as possible, to make it feasible for relevant authorities to implement this guidance in practice and to ensure that there will be oversight of it in Parliament.

We are committed to considering the inclusion of employment and other public services through the call for evidence. We heard that best practice in supporting employment and benefits services is also going to be included in the guidance. We know that employment can have a significant benefit in terms of living independently and participating fully. That is why it is so important that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), has sat through this afternoon’s debate. He was also at the reception earlier in the week, along with the Education Secretary. This is a cross-Government approach, and we cannot act just with one Department on its own. That shows that the full strength of the Government is behind these changes. We will also be looking at transport and leisure facilities, and removing some of the barriers to enable people with Down syndrome to be able to fully participate in the activities that they want to do. We will be working with other Departments to consider how to best incorporate those areas into the guidance.

To ensure that the guidance is implemented in practice, every integrated care board will be required to have a named lead for Down syndrome. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset said, we want there to be a clear person accountable. The named lead will be responsible for ensuring that the Down Syndrome Act is implemented in practice. NHS England is currently developing its statutory guidance for ICBs, including for the Down syndrome lead role. Having a named lead for Down syndrome will help to ensure that the specific needs of people with Down syndrome are considered when services are designed and commissioned. One speaker this afternoon said that that would open the floodgates for change, but we absolutely need change to happen, so I do not necessarily have a problem with

that. My right hon. Friend also touched on the school census. I wish to reassure him that although we have missed the deadline for 2023-24, we are looking at 2024-25 for this. We will be discussing that with the Education Secretary, because we recognise the importance of the school census and gathering that information.

I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. It has been a consensual debate and it shows Parliament at its best when we work together to deal with these challenges. I pay tribute to the families, carers, organisations and professionals who work tirelessly on behalf of people with Down syndrome, but I pay a particular tribute to those with Down syndrome themselves. It is indeed “With Us Not For Us”—I absolutely get that message. That is why we are here today. I also want to pay tribute to the officials at the Department of Health and Social Care—David Nuttall and his team—who have got that message loudly too and are working with the community to make sure that the Act and the guidance address their needs. Next year, I am sure that we will update the House further on the progress that has been made.

3.3 pm

Dr Fox: With the leave of the House, may I thank all colleagues who have taken part in this debate? As the Minister just said, this is the House at its best, which almost certainly means, sadly, the media coverage at its least. As they say, “If you want a secret kept, say it in Parliament, outside Prime Minister’s questions.”

A couple of points are worth reiterating. There are those concerned about people with similar conditions to Down syndrome being left aside, but I do not believe that to be true, because of the measures that were considered and the commitments given in Committee by the Government. Although, again, it is worth pointing out that people with Down syndrome share a number of characteristics with other groups, they are, none the less, a discrete population. I wish the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) well in his attempts to get Down syndrome included in the Scottish Government legislation, because there is a problem of genuinely unintended consequences. Leaving it out could result in legislative overshadowing and we may unintentionally leave the Down syndrome groups isolated in their legal rights.

One thing that has come out loud and clear from this debate is the need for professional education, whether in health, education or social care. I worry about not only diagnostic overshadowing but social overshadowing, whereby the need for people to live, earn and be independent is hidden by a stigma, which is still all too prevalent and needs to be removed. We in the UK have taken a great lead on this issue, as was reflected at the United Nations on Tuesday. We should relish this challenge as a country. We talk about global Britain in a whole range of areas, including diplomacy and security, but should not one of the great challenges for global Britain be our setting an example on social care that the rest of the world wants to follow? That would be something to achieve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Down Syndrome Day.

Energy Trilemma

3.5 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling the energy trilemma.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and to the many colleagues from across the parties who have supported today's important debate on tackling the energy trilemma. It is perhaps the most critical issue facing us today. Putin's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the extraordinary pressure on the energy systems of countries right across the world, and also demonstrated the crucial importance of energy sovereignty. For us in the UK, although the risk to security of supply remains low, the Russian invasion has demonstrated as never before the importance of balance in tackling the energy trilemma.

We can think of the energy trilemma as being a bit like a three-legged stool. Its three equally important legs are first, keeping the lights on; secondly, keeping the cost of energy bills down; and thirdly, decarbonising right across the world. If we are to sit comfortably on that stool, all three legs must be in balance, and be given equal consideration. Achieving that balance is by no means easy. As chairman of the 1922 Back-Bench committee on business, energy and industrial strategy, I have, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), who is vice-chairman of the committee and is here, the noble Lord Lilley, the vice-chairman of the committee from the other place, and other colleagues from across our two Houses, been looking in detail at the practical steps that need to be taken to meet this enormous challenge.

The Government are, I know, already working hard to tackle the energy trilemma, but while they already have a great deal in hand, a shove here and a push there could make a huge positive difference in very short order to consumers, businesses and our decarbonisation efforts. In our recent report, "Energy Market Reform: Tackling the energy trilemma," our committee made 34 recommendations. They include unblocking renewables; cutting energy demand; improving the flexibility of energy pricing; looking at the future of the energy price guarantee; and creating a new energy Department in Whitehall. I was very pleased to see that the Prime Minister came to the same conclusion on that last point, and created the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. I sincerely hope that we will be as successful with our other 33 recommendations. I am keen to use this debate to make the case for them to Ministers.

There is no doubt that the UK has been a world leader in deploying renewable energy projects, coming from almost a standing start in 2010. By 2020, solar and wind produced nearly 30% of the UK's electricity—a tenfold increase on 2010. The UK is proud to have almost half the world's offshore-deployed wind, all created under successive Conservative Governments—a great record of commitment that we can point to. However, renewable energy projects face increasing bottlenecks, including delays in the planning system, delays to grid connections, shortages in supply chains and a creaking electricity market design. In addition, there is an increasing risk of skills shortages as the

deployment of offshore wind ramps up this decade. To tackle these problems, the Government should consider a number of measures that should already be in hand.

First, we should speed up the planning system by straight away implementing the new national policy statement for renewables, which has been good to go since 2011, and which would provide much greater investability. In particular, the concern over developers reserving grid connections and allowing years to pass without using them means that vital housing and infrastructure projects cannot go ahead because they cannot get a grid connection.

Secondly, the Government should consider officially committing to the development of an offshore ring main for offshore wind. Some projects are already sharing infrastructure, but clear guidance from Government would speed that up and make it much more acceptable to communities who do not want the huge onshore infrastructure currently being pushed onto their beaches and sensitive onshore conservation areas.

Thirdly, the Government could immediately issue direction on where new power lines should be located. Overhead lines are much cheaper, but less acceptable to communities. Underground lines, on the other hand, are potentially six times more expensive. There is a lack of clarity on policy in this critical area, particularly because independent analysis has concluded that, to meet our 2030 targets for electrifying our energy system, the National Grid will need to build seven times as much infrastructure over just the next seven years as we have achieved in total over the last 32 years—a huge mountain to climb.

Fourthly, although there has been progress on floating offshore wind projects, the Government should take seriously the evidence that floating offshore wind on Britain's west coast in particular could strengthen our energy security, improving electricity resources in Northern Ireland as well as providing a hedge against low wind speed around other parts of the British Isles.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Lady is making excellent points. She served as Energy Minister, I think, and I am reminded that the best part of 20 years ago one of her predecessors as Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, was promoting the case for an interconnector to go down the west coast of the United Kingdom and through the Irish sea. That did not happen, essentially because of concerns in Ofgem about the danger of stranded assets. I think her idea is a good one, but does she agree that in order to achieve it there will have to be a fundamental rethink about the way we regulate the industry?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; of course regulation, safety and considering the impact of potential stranded assets are vital. I do not think there should be any fundamental objections to expanding the use of interconnectors, but I am talking specifically here about floating offshore wind, which has huge potential but is not yet being deployed in the UK.

Fifthly, the Government should stop paying offshore wind farms in Scotland to switch off when it is too windy, which is already costing bill payers billions a year. Instead, we should look at piloting local electricity pricing, encouraging producers to work with business

and consumers to use more electricity when it is plentiful and to reduce usage or use stored energy when the wind stops. That could be valuable for everyone, from Scottish citizens accessing cheap electricity when the wind is blowing to Cornish residents doing likewise when the sun is shining. Local electricity pricing offers transformational change that would make much better sense of the successful deployment of so many renewables.

One key recommendation made by the 1922 BEIS committee is on how to make these projects more acceptable to local communities. Local referendums and local compensation caused a bit of a stir when we announced them, but the idea has a lot of merit. In short, the report recommends that any proposed onshore wind, solar or shale gas extraction project should be subject to a local referendum on the basis of a simple majority. Where 50% or more of those who vote are in favour, the project can then go to normal planning considerations, but without the prospect of being overturned for lack of local support.

In return for the community accepting that limit on individual objections, our report proposes that local residents should receive free or subsidised energy bills for the entire lifetime of the project. That would have the effect of not only encouraging local communities, but forcing developers to think twice before locating renewables too close to sensitive communities because of the impact on the financial viability of their project. At the same time, bearing in mind the need for an urgent increase in the amount of electricity infrastructure, the committee recommends that the National Grid should be encouraged to build new pylons alongside transport corridors, and that renewables developers should be encouraged to locate alongside them, resulting in cheaper grid connections.

The second area of investigation in our report was how to cut energy demand. Every unit of energy that is not used is one that does not have to be generated. That reduces carbon emissions, cuts the cost of energy to consumers and to businesses, and improves our energy security—a genuine triple win. Ever since the committee's first report in April 2022, we have been recommending a wide range of energy-saving actions, and I will highlight just a few of them.

First, boiler installers should focus not only on safety, as they do at present, but on efficiency. Every boiler installation should provide only sufficient power to heat that particular home or business, and the temperature gauge should be set at the most efficient level.

Secondly, the completion of the smart meter roll-out should be prioritised and the move to half-hourly pricing brought forward, to put control in the hands of consumers through smart tariffs. They could then choose to wash clothes, cook or charge their car when energy is cheap. Likewise, businesses could plan their energy use around cheaper periods. That could have a big impact on flattening the overall daily peaks in energy demand, with massive benefit for energy security and cost. It would then make sense to regulate for white goods to be smart as standard, to automate the way in which customers take advantage of cheaper price windows.

Thirdly, the report proposes that the Government should bring forward enforcement of the new homes standards and expand the energy company obligation—ECO4—scheme to insulate more cold homes, which would offer far better value for taxpayers than our current

policy of subsidising heating for draughty homes. We also recommend that an organisation modelled on Home Energy Scotland should be introduced in England to provide better advice and support to households.

An area in which the committee feels that Government policy has taken a wrong turn is the energy cap itself. It was a well-intentioned policy to stop customers being ripped off by their energy supplier if they did not switch provider often enough, but the current energy crisis has exposed major flaws in the operation of the cap. The cap is below the true cost of supplying energy, so almost all customers are now on capped tariffs in addition to extremely costly additional taxpayer subsidies. That has killed the market for switching between energy suppliers, and has exacerbated the bankruptcy rate of energy suppliers. The report recommends, first, a thorough review of the energy price cap; secondly, that the green levies on energy bills be permanently moved to general taxation to take away some of the regressive nature of levies on energy bills; and thirdly, that a more targeted system for energy bills be introduced. One specific proposal that is worthy of consideration is a cap for basic electricity usage per household, above which households are exposed to the full unsubsidised costs of energy.

Fourthly, our report recommends a new requirement for energy suppliers to offer long-term, fixed-price energy deals so that consumers and businesses have the budgeting certainty that so many achieve through taking out fixed-rate mortgages for their homes or buildings. Fifthly, energy regulator Ofgem must shoulder much of the blame for supplier failures. Financial regulation of energy suppliers has been far too weak. The Government should direct Ofgem to implement banking-style financial stability requirements to avoid a repeat of recent history, whereby an energy supplier can make money when energy costs are below the cap but goes bust if energy costs rise above the cap, leaving all bill payers to pick up the tab.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): There are days when the renewables fail and, when that happens, we have to buy electricity in, particularly from places such as Belgium. Should the Government not be expanding what they have started in looking at nuclear, which my right hon. Friend has not mentioned, and particularly small nuclear reactors? The Government are looking at one type of small nuclear reactor, but there are two. Should we not be encouraging the Government to move into that field, fast?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of nuclear. I am a huge supporter of both small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors. They offer massive potential for baseload energy here in the UK, which is crucial. While there are not recommendations in this particular Back-Bench committee report, I agree with him.

To conclude, I congratulate the Government on creating the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. There is no doubt that having a specific focus on tackling the energy trilemma is vital if we are to meet our goal of leading the world in tackling global climate change while building secure and affordable energy sources at home.

3.20 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a considerable privilege to follow the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), and I thank her for securing this vital debate for all of us.

This has been an important week because we have had the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which bluntly gives what is essentially a final warning to humanity. The report lays bare what is already happening because of the damage that we are collectively doing to our planet as a direct result of the energy choices we have made for the last century. Extreme weather caused by climate breakdown has led to increased deaths from intensifying heatwaves in all regions, millions of lives and homes destroyed in droughts and floods, millions of people facing hunger and “increasingly irreversible losses” in vital ecosystems. That is the damage that has already been done, and if we continue down this path, the final consequences will not simply be about deepening that damage. It is much more fundamental; it is about whether we can continue to live and survive on this planet. That is the harsh reality of where we are, and that is why this debate is so vital.

In the years to come, energy is everything. It is quite literally the be-all and end-all, because the types of energy we use will determine whether we meet the challenge of climate change, and it will determine whether humanity can live on this planet for the foreseeable future. Unless we move immediately to a completely new system of energy production, we will have neither security nor prosperity. We often talk in this House about the scale of the challenges we have faced since the financial crisis in 2008: how to deliver sustainable economic growth, drive investment in our economy, drive prosperity and drive up living standards. The enormous opportunities that we have in green energy would enable us to kick-start that, to answer the questions on the supply chain that the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire raised and to ensure we have the skills, so that we can lead the way in not only providing energy for ourselves but exporting green energy, just as we did with the oil and gas revolution in the 1970s. We have to rise to that challenge, and we have to rise to it here and now.

The terrible truth is that the UK is being left behind when it comes to green energy and green growth. The US and the EU are powering ahead, and we need to make sure that we are not playing catch-up in the United Kingdom. The Inflation Reduction Act passed in August 2022 makes a remarkable \$369 billion available to climate and clean energy programmes in the US—just think of the scale of the opportunity that comes from that ambition. Where is our ambition to match that? President Biden’s programme is a real levelling-up agenda, making green energy the economic catalyst to restore and renew the industrial heartlands of the US. Likewise, the European Union is powering ahead. It is debating the passing of the green deal industrial plan, with which it wants to grow clean energy production, revitalise manufacturing and support well-paid jobs.

If I may, I will just look narrowly at Scotland for a minute or two, because I know the figures there better than the figures elsewhere. Last year, the SNP Westminster group commissioned what has been called the Skilling report—“The Economic Opportunity for Scotland from

Renewable Energy and Green Technology”—which I know some colleagues in the House have read. There is no fantasy in that report, because we are just reflecting on what we already know.

When the report was published, Scotland was producing 12 GW of green energy. It is now producing about 13 GW, but the report highlights the potential to increase that figure to 80 GW by 2050: a fivefold increase over the course of that period, generating as much as four times the green energy that Scotland needs. That represents the opportunity to keep the lights on—a phrase that was referred to earlier—right across the United Kingdom, and ultimately to produce hydrogen on a scalable basis and export to other parts of the European Union as well. We need to take advantage of the natural opportunity that we have in green energy, making sure that we are at the cutting edge of that. According to Skilling, the transition from fossil fuels will ultimately deliver more jobs than we currently have in oil and gas—over 300,000 jobs by 2050.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire talked about the planning regime and the skilled jobs that we need to develop in order to make this happen, but there needs to be a sense of urgency in doing all of those things, or we will miss that opportunity. There is an enormous challenge, if I may say so, in making sure that we have the jobs in turbine manufacturing and providing cabling. We will achieve that only if we have the visibility of the orders coming in that will encourage people to invest here from across the United Kingdom, and indeed, to come and invest from elsewhere.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will happily give way.

David Duguid: I am genuinely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I agree with pretty much everything he has said so far, which is unusual. I am sure he is familiar with the report by Professor de Leeuw at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, which assessed that at least 90% of the skills required for the net zero future already exist in the oil and gas industry. We should make the most of those skills while we can.

Ian Blackford: Actually, I agree with those comments from the professor and from the hon. Gentleman. When I have been in Aberdeen and been out looking at some of the offshore technology there, it has struck me that there is that transferability—if I may call it that—of skills from the oil and gas sector. Of course, we need to make that happen.

But what I would say is that, if Skilling is right—and I believe he is—the scale of the opportunity goes way beyond the jobs that we currently have in oil and gas. We need to make sure that we have the research and development and the innovation right across the supply chain, and that we are utilising not just our higher education sector, but the further education sector to deliver people with the appropriate skills to do this. That is an enormous opportunity. Out of that, there is an enormous opportunity to make sure that we have an industrial strategy that is fit for purpose as well. I would be delighted if we had these kinds of debates more often in this House—if we were actually having detailed discussions about how we do all this. What do we have

to do to make the planning system work in a way that is respectful to local communities, but recognises the need and desire to move ahead?

Mr Carmichael: On the subject of planning and the delays that are associated with it, I have no doubt that the right hon. Gentleman is aware that, in Canada, the time from consent to installation for a tidal device is around three years, whereas in this country, it is seven or eight. It comes down to something as simple as the fact that we do all the different impact assessments and the rest of it sequentially, when with a bit of imagination and creativity, they could all be done side by side.

Ian Blackford: I agree. The right hon. Member has made an important point. Often, the question is: how do we make sure we are protecting the rights of stakeholders and the rights of communities, while being able to do things at pace? What we have been talking about highlights the potential loss of technological leadership, because if we cannot do these things, we will not get that investment. In that context, let me go to the side a little, because I want to talk about one of the subsets of the green industry that has enormous potential for us.

We heard a comment earlier about nuclear and the opportunity to provide baseload. I have mentioned this in the House on a number of occasions, and I do not apologise for doing so again: there is enormous opportunity in tidal, and that has been demonstrated with the success we have seen with a number of projects. I encourage everyone in the House to examine a peer-reviewed Royal Society report published just ahead of COP26. It highlighted the opportunity of developing 11.5 GW of energy from tidal. If we look at the projects already developed in the United Kingdom, we tend to find that as much as 80% of that supply chain has been generated domestically. A number of the companies doing that are supplying equipment to such countries as France and Canada, as has been mentioned. There is a real danger that unless we recognise the scale of the opportunity, we will lose that leadership.

I am delighted that in the last contracts for difference round, the UK Government put in place a ringfenced pot of £20 million for tidal. That got us off to a degree of a start in fulfilling that ambition laid out in the Royal Society report. It was not as much as I would have liked. For us to fulfil that potential, we need to provide as much as £50 million annually, but I regret that over the past few days we have seen that that ringfenced pot will be cut to £10 million. I say to the House that we run the risk of losing this industry, and I appeal to the Government to revisit this issue. We can provide that baseload from tidal, as an alternative to nuclear energy. If we are ambitious about getting to that kind of scale in tidal, ultimately we will be providing that baseload on a more affordable basis.

David Duguid: I do not want to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman's flow, and we can all agree that we wish there was more money available for different things, but he might not be aware that the £20 million that was initially ringfenced was for a two-year period. It has since been changed to a one-year or annual allocation. The £10 million for one year is essentially equivalent to £20 million for two years.

Ian Blackford: When the announcement was made, it was on the basis that it would be £20 million pot. *[Interruption.]* I have spoken to many of the operators over the course of the last while, and they do not share the hon. Gentleman's view. But let us try to find consensus where we can and see the opportunity in all this, because that is key to this matter.

Sir Paul Beresford: The right hon. Gentleman said that tidal would be an alternative to nuclear, but it should be in addition to nuclear. The demand that is coming and the demand if we move into hydrogen will be massive—beyond anything we can imagine.

Ian Blackford: I have talked about the Skilling report and the ability to get to 80 GW. There is the opportunity with tidal to provide the baseload. I argue on that basis that we probably do not need the investment in nuclear to get to where we need to get. One thing I referenced was that I did not believe there is any fantasy in the numbers we have from Skilling. They are eminently achievable on the roadmap that we talk about.

Let us look at some of the choices and where the money has to come from, and put that in the context of the debate we are having over the trilemma and the choices that many people are having to make because of the cost of energy. We know that a number of producers have made eye-watering profits as a consequence of high energy prices over the past year. This Government have rightly introduced a windfall tax. If we had wanted, we could have hypothecated some of that to make sure we were speeding up investment in renewables. We could have provided the £50 million that I am asking for on an annual basis so that we could fulfil that potential in tidal.

One aspect of the events of the past 12 months has been the enormous increase in share buy-backs from energy producers. In essence, what are share buy-backs? They are in effect a return of capital to shareholders. We have taxed the profits of the generators to some extent, but we have not taxed the return of cash to shareholders—windfall gains. On a one-off basis, we could have taxed share buy-backs in the same way that we tax dividends, and provided the ability to generate the investment that we need in our energy transition. That would have been the sensible thing to do.

Let me come back to the European Union, because there is already an €800 billion NextGenerationEU post-coronavirus pandemic recovery scheme. EU member states must reserve 37% of their spending for that green transition. About €100 billion of the EU's 2021 to 2027 cohesion fund, which is dedicated to regional development, goes to green spending. Horizon Europe, the EU science and innovation programme, allocates €40 billion to green deal research and innovation, and industry partnerships. The investment I am asking for and that I believe we need in tidal has to be seen in the context of the scale of that investment.

On a subject that many of us discuss, carbon capture and storage, the EU has commenced its third round before the UK has come close to completing its second. We are all aware of the promises that have been made about carbon capture and storage in the north-east of Scotland. There are Members in this Chamber who are as passionate as I am about making sure it happens, and let us remember why. If we are serious about getting to

[*Ian Blackford*]

our net zero targets—whether 2045 in Scotland or 2050 in this place—then carbon capture and storage has to happen.

We have failed to back carbon capture and storage, and the harsh reality is that the renewable energy budget has been cut by a third and there has been the cut to the ringfenced budget for tidal stream. We need to make sure that we create competitive advantages out of the bounty that we know is there. Let us come back again to the green industrial strategy, because if we are able to develop our green energy sources to the extent that I believe we can, we need to make sure there is a competitive advantage for our industries and the industries of the future.

We also need to make sure that our communities benefit from the investment that is taking place. To take my own home island of Skye, an enormous increase in investment is coming down the line over the next few years in wind generation. We will be producing many times the amount of energy that the island of Skye can absorb by itself, yet there is an additional cost to access the network from producing in such remote and rural areas. There is a double whammy: because of the nature of the regional distribution market, we pay the highest prices to get the electricity back again. It simply is not good enough, and the communities making legitimate sacrifices in producing that energy have to be compensated effectively.

While we are talking about onshore, offshore and tidal, we should not forget the opportunities we have with pumped hydro storage. I delighted that, this week, SSE has announced a £100 million investment in the biggest pumped hydro storage scheme in the United Kingdom for 40 years. The Coire Glas scheme will power over 3 million homes, more than doubling the United Kingdom's electricity storage capacity. Again, it is demonstration of what can be done in providing the baseload that is so necessary.

We need to pose the question why—in what is, for Scotland and arguably for the UK, an energy-rich country—people are facing the kind of costs that they have done over the last year. The average household bill in Shetland, if I may refer to that, in October 2022 was £5,578, more than double the UK average of £2,500, according to evidence submitted to the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee by Shetland Islands Council. The latest available figures show that a third—33%—of households in remote and rural areas in Scotland are in extreme fuel poverty. That statistic has not been updated since 2019 due to covid, and therefore does not reflect the current cost of living crisis. There will have been a massive increase in the percentage of our households that are not just in fuel poverty, but in extreme fuel poverty.

The only place where the UK Government seem to be increasing investment is in nuclear energy, which is far more expensive than the renewable alternatives. The Institute for Public Policy Research said:

“If the Government are serious about reaping the benefits of the transition and levelling up, it should learn from Joe Biden, scale up public investment, and bring forward a serious strategy to build an economy that is prosperous, fair and green.”

The CBI said:

“The UK is falling behind rapidly—to the Americans and the Europeans, who are outspending and outsmarting us.”

The world faces an energy trilemma, but the UK faces a simple binary choice: will it continue to be left behind, or will we collectively work in humanity's self-interest to tackle climate change and embrace the opportunity for green growth?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call David Duguid.

3.40 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Deputy Speaker—I have not had the pleasure before now, so welcome to the Chair.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). I found that I agreed with most of his speech, although perhaps not with some of it. In particular that last point about there being a simple binary choice—I think it is a mistake to think it is either one side of the argument or another. This issue is far more complex than that, and I will try to cover some of those points in my speech. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on securing this important debate. I joined her committee as the report was being completed, but I was delighted to play a small part in that report and provide a forward to it.

The energy trilemma refers to the need to find a balance between energy security, affordability, and sustainability. As we continue through the energy transition, which we have already started, we need to keep the lights on, generate heat, and enable transportation—in other words, we need to keep our society and economy alive and well, and do that in an affordable and sustainable way. We are all aware of the increased energy prices right across the globe, caused initially by global shortages as the world economy started to recover from the covid-19 pandemic, and exacerbated further by Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing conflict there.

On affordability, I welcome the Government's support for households and businesses through this difficult period, and particularly for those hardest hit. Fundamentally, however, affordability is best achieved by securing a reliable and plentiful supply of energy from a range of sources. Sustainability can also be defined in terms of keeping a secure and prosperous energy sector alive, including jobs and communities that the energy sector supports. More typically, sustainability usually refers to the impact that our social and economic activity has on the environment, and specifically to the impact on climate change from the emission of greenhouse gasses. Therefore, we need to keep the energy flowing, we need to make that energy affordable, and we need to reduce the impact on climate change created by the production and consumption of that energy. That is the energy trilemma.

The generation of energy for power, heat and transportation has, for many years, depended greatly on the combustion of hydrocarbons. That combustion of hydrocarbons has been shown to have a direct impact on the climate. So clearly, we must do something about that, and we are. The United Kingdom has already reduced carbon dioxide emissions by almost 50% compared with 1990 levels. Until covid, we had also grown the economy by more than 70% while doing so. In June 2019, the UK became the first major economy in the world to pass legislation to end our contribution to global emissions—in other words, net zero—by 2050.

Net zero means that any emissions would be balanced by schemes to offset an equivalent amount of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, by planting trees or using technology such as carbon capture and storage. However, if climate change is a man-made problem as we keep hearing, it will need a man-made solution. Planting trees will make a contribution of course, and it is important we do that, as a return to nature, providing habitats and so on is very important.

Direct air capture is an exciting technology by which CO₂ can be stripped directly from the atmosphere using a facility that, although large, takes up only about one 100th of the footprint that an equivalent area of forest would take to do the same job. That very expensive solution is still under development and we should keep a close eye on it. Besides, the captured carbon from such a process will still need to be utilised and stored somewhere.

That leads me to carbon capture, utilisation and storage. The inconvenient truth—if I can borrow that phrase—for some is that today about three quarters of the UK's energy comes from oil and gas. Some 20% of our energy today is electricity. The rest of our energy use is fuel for transport, heat for homes, and industrial power and processes. It is absolutely right that we accelerate the installation of as many renewable sustainable and low carbon sources as possible, and as fast as possible. The UK Government's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, launched in November 2020, set out plans and commitments for a range of technologies, many of which have been discussed and will be discussed today, including CCUS.

That was followed in March 2021 by the North sea transition deal, incorporated later into the British energy security strategy in April 2022. The deal was and is a transformative partnership between the UK Government and the UK's offshore oil and gas sector to harness the power of that industry to help deliver net zero by 2050. As well as formalising energy transition and decarbonisation commitments, the North sea transition deal unlocks up to £16 billion of private investment, supports up to 40,000 jobs, and reduces emissions by up to 60 million metric tonnes. In the two years since the deal was agreed, the offshore oil and gas industry has made significant strides in supply decarbonisation, developing CCUS and hydrogen, transforming the supply chain and facilitating workforce mobility, as was discussed earlier. The industry has reduced its own production emissions by 20% since 2018. Leasing rounds are being developed for electrification. Access to the grid is very important, something that has already been discussed. Just last week, the Chancellor committed £20 billion for CCUS development. Offshore Energies UK, the trade body that represents the offshore energies sector, has developed the world's first well decommissioning guidelines for carbon capture and storage, and is advising on best practice for things like methane emissions reduction.

But some of the key pillars of the deal—Government support for domestic energy supplies, a stable fiscal regime for the sector and encouraging continued investment—have taken a little bit of a hit. I will come back to the energy profits levy later in my speech. Part of the deal is to ensure oil and gas for as long as we need it, and there continues to be demand. Even by 2050, it is estimated that we will still require between 15% and 20% of our energy, heat and transport to be supplied by hydrocarbons. It therefore makes sense that our own

domestic source of oil and gas will need to be maintained and expanded to supply that demand, even as it continues to decline. We produce a little under 50% of our own gas at the moment, with a majority of the shortfall being supplied by other countries such as Norway, the US and Qatar. The carbon footprint of just getting that gas here can be up to twice as high as if it was produced here.

I welcome the UK Government's launch of the 33rd UK offshore licensing round. Many have asked—I was hoping for a Labour intervention on that point, but the Labour Benches are woefully empty today—how that can at all be consistent with our net zero objectives. For the reasons I described, a barrel of oil or cubic metre of gas produced in this country is better for us than those produced elsewhere while we are still using it. Hydrocarbons produced here are done so much more responsibly, under the strictest of regulatory regimes, and create fewer emissions from transportation than those imported from elsewhere.

We also need to make sure we retain the skills, expertise, technology and the capital and revenue generated by oil and gas, which is still significant, despite being in decline, to help deliver the energy transition. Unlike previous licensing rounds, this licensing round has been launched following the introduction by the Government of the climate compatibility checkpoint. The checkpoint ensures that no offshore licence will be awarded that puts the UK's Paris agreement and COP26 commitments at risk. It also puts more emphasis on the industry's own operational emissions than previously, as well as keeping a close eye on the status of the UK as a net importer of oil and gas. We have been a net importer of oil and gas since 2004.

We will not get to 2050 with the lights on, our homes and offices heated and our economy still moving without oil and gas. It follows that we will certainly not get to net zero by 2050 without CCUS. The Acorn CCS and hydrogen project in my constituency forms part of the Scottish CCUS cluster. At the time of track 1 bidding it was generally regarded as the most advanced cluster and ready to go, and was selected as the reserve cluster for track 1. Crucially, as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, it is the only CCUS cluster in Scotland. It is vital for capturing emissions from industrial complexes such as Grangemouth in the central belt or Mossmorran in Fife.

There are plans for a new CCS power station in Peterhead in my constituency, which, when complete, will be able to provide a stable baseload powered from natural gas but with the Scottish cluster activated, and 95% emission free. This new CCS power station will help to maintain energy security into the future, particularly as—unless we hear differently today—there is unlikely to be new nuclear anytime soon in Scotland. I look forward to the further detail on the £20 billion announced by the Chancellor last week on CCUS and the progression of track 2. I also look forward to the Energy Bill, currently on Report in the other place but due to come back here soon, I am told.

Even if we were to get to absolute zero emissions—never mind net zero—across the whole of the UK, those UK emissions add up to around 1% of global emissions. We often hear that as an excuse for not doing anything, but I do not believe that for a second. The real opportunity that we have as a United Kingdom is for Governments

[David Duguid]

and Parliaments to come together and work constructively with industry, not only to get where we need to be in future but to use the skills, experience, technology and resources available to us here in this country. That will enable us to make the energy transition to net zero in the most predictive and successful way, to take the opportunity to lead the world in the process of energy transition and to show not just how it is done but that it can be done.

I want to finish on the subject of the energy profits levy. Opposition parties have called for and continue to call for ever higher taxes on oil and gas producers. Compared with almost every other business that currently pays corporation tax of 19%—due to rise next month to 25%—oil and gas companies were already paying 40%, with the EPL bringing them to 75% overall. Contrary to Opposition parties' calls for a straightforward punitive tax, I welcome the investment allowance provided by this Government. However, the allowance is not available for all investment opportunities, including in renewables, as has been pointed out. I am told by OEUK that over 90% of members have downgraded their investment plans in the UK as a result of the EPL. I recognise that the revenues raised by this tax go some way towards paying some of the energy support provided by this Government, but I look forward to engaging with the industry and Government on how and when the profits made by these companies in this country are deemed to have returned to a more normal level.

The EPL has a particular impact on smaller independent operators such as Harbour, Ithaca, Spirit, EnQuest and a number of other small businesses, which do not have the resources of BP and Shell to invest elsewhere in the world. Another impact on the small independent producers comes from the revisions to the EPL to eliminate the price floor, which has had the unintended consequence of reducing lending capacity available from banks to the sector. Unlike some larger companies, the smaller organisations cannot afford to fund capital expenditure solely from their own balance sheets.

The independent operators will be vital to ensure the continued development of North sea oilfields as the major companies redeploy assets elsewhere, and are therefore critical to help the Government avoid the costs of stranded North sea assets in the medium to long term. That will be critical to safeguard the UK's security of energy supply in years to come, while at the same time those companies' resources, skills and expertise are used to ensure that we make the energy transition to net zero as planned.

3.53 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on bringing this subject to the House. Her metaphor of the three-legged stool is a very good one. If we can move away from the immediacy of the problems, this debate allows us a few minutes to think about the issue in a more strategic manner. The point about the three-legged stool is that it works as a stool only if it has all three legs. If we take away any one of the three legs—affordability, security or decarbonisation—the other two will not achieve their purpose. The debate is often frustrating and ill served by false, binary choices. The point about a

“trilemma” is that the choices that have to be made are about the balance of the progress we make on the three heads of the challenge, as well as the different means by which we seek to achieve them.

For years, to my certain knowledge, the debate has been bedevilled by easy options, and that remains true about some parts of the debate today. I remain to be convinced about nuclear, either in its own right or as a source of baseload, but sceptics like me have to then ask, “Well, where does the baseload come from?” From my point of view, there are enormous opportunities from developments such as tidal energy, which I will come on to as it matters a lot to me and my constituency. There is also the issue of storage and, beyond that, the flattening of the curve through supply-side and demand-side management. Again, it is all about balance. There is no silver bullet here; there is no one technology, area or direction of travel that will solve all our difficulties.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire also spoke about local involvement in planning decisions. There is one other item that I would commend to her in terms of managing these issues: local benefit. Communities that are to have a wind farm, for example, have the opportunity to see some money coming back directly to their community, which makes an enormous difference.

In my own parish, we have a development of five wind turbines that provides a fund, which is administered by the local community council. My student sons have both benefited from that fund in terms of support given to them during their years at university. The support provided by such funds is small but meaningful. If we are to change the way in which we generate energy, from it being produced in large amounts in a small number of places to a much more diffuse pattern of generation, we have to find different ways of doing that.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The Back-Bench committee proposed that individual households living very close to a renewable project should have their energy bills subsidised or free for the duration of that project, so I agree with the right hon. Gentleman but I think it should be even more direct than just a pot, as is so often the case.

Mr Carmichael: Absolutely. We make progress on these things incrementally, so if we can get to that situation that would be music to my heart and to the hearts of my constituents.

In Orkney, we already generate more energy from renewables than we can use in our own community. However, as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) observed earlier, because of the way in which the market is regulated and structured, we actually pay more for it. That is something that generates not just energy, but an enormous amount of resentment in the community as well.

Ian Blackford: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the progress he is making. There is a real issue about the disbursement of these funds because they are becoming particularly meaningful; it is a hot topic at the moment in Skye. We need to reflect on the powers that often lie with developers to make the determination as to how that pot is disbursed. We will have to be very careful across Government, here in Westminster and in the devolved Administrations, about setting the principles that have to be followed. If not, we will end up in a

situation in which communities will, quite frankly, not get the benefit to extent that they should. We need to have effective governance in all of this to make sure that people are protected properly.

Mr Carmichael: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. With a commitment to the principle from the top, everything underneath tends to fall into place.

There is another aspect of community benefits in which we may have missed a trick in Scotland recently. Although we missed out on a sovereign wealth fund, apart from in Orkney and Shetland, in the 1970s, there would have been an opportunity to generate more of a sovereign wealth fund from offshore renewables in the ScotWind round. We missed the boat this time, but I hope we can make up for it in future.

In many ways, Orkney and Shetland demonstrates the energy transition issues and the trilemma in microcosm: we have long, dark, cold winters, we have poor-quality housing stock and we are off the mains gas grid, so we do not have the same opportunities for access to cheaper heating as other parts of the country. The affordability element therefore very much matters to us. We generate more electricity from renewables than we can use for ourselves, but because of how the market was regulated until recently, when we finally got consent for a cable to the Scottish mainland, we have not been able to maximise the benefits. It is galling that although we are leading the way in decarbonised energy production, we end up paying more because we are part of a market that is regulated for the UK as a whole and that relies too heavily on the wholesale price of gas, as we are now seeing.

Let me just vent parenthetically for a second or two about the energy company SSE and its occasional choice simply to stop paying people who are entitled to feed-in tariff payments. I always seem to have at least one such case on the go among my constituency casework. Just last week, I was able to secure eventual, long-overdue repayment from SSE of £72,000 to one farmer in my constituency. That was money that SSE owed him and there was absolutely no reason for it not to pay, but for arbitrary and unaccountable reasons it seems occasionally just to decide to stop paying people. To my mind, that is an abuse of the privilege that it has been given by successive Governments.

Orkney is home to the European Marine Energy Centre, which is just about to celebrate its 20th anniversary. It has been at the forefront of the development of tidal stream energy generation; no doubt it could now play a similar role in the development of floating offshore wind.

Like other hon. Members, I was delighted to see the ringfenced pot in the round 4 allocation, but I share the concerns of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. That is not just me speaking; the UK Marine Energy Council, RenewableUK and Scottish Renewables have all reacted badly, so I hope that the Department is already thinking about how to maximise the opportunities by getting some of the money back.

With the synergy between oil and gas, we have been at the forefront of the country's energy needs for 40 years now, and the development of offshore renewables is the obvious next step. When I speak to apprentices, as I did during National Apprenticeship Week last month, they tell me that although they are starting apprenticeships

in the oil and gas industry, they fully expect to have transitioned to something different by the end of their working lives.

For the past 40 years, my constituency has been home to the two largest oil terminals in western Europe: Flotta in Orkney and Sullom Voe in Shetland, which provide a visual demonstration of the just transition. EnQuest, the terminal operator at Sullom Voe, is now working on projects involving hydrogen, carbon capture, use and storage, and offshore electrification of production. It is a visual illustration of transition, but again it shows just how ill served we are by binary choices. All the time, we seem to be told, "You can have renewables or you can have hydrocarbons, but you can't have both." That is dangerous nonsense. We have allowed production of oil and gas on the UK continental shelf to decline in recent years, and it has been to our detriment. It was never put in these terms at the time, but I cannot think why anyone ever thought it would be a good idea to rely on Vladimir Putin for the purchase of our gas and Mohammed bin Salman for the production of our oil when we have a rich resource on our own doorstep. As we heard from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), the production of oil and gas in the North sea or to the west of Shetland is much less carbon-intensive than importing it from other parts of the world.

The point, surely, is this: it is not an either/or. There is no route to decarbonisation and achieving net zero other than one that goes through oil and gas production. I do not want to see the future generations of my constituents working in oil and gas. I do want to see them work in renewables, but I think that that will be much more likely if we take a long, hard, clear-eyed look at what happens in the future with oil and gas production on our own continental shelf.

There are many other things that we should be doing, such as managing supply and demand and increasing the amount of storage and smart grid—something that offers great opportunities for those who can turn on their washing machines at the other end of the country using their smartphones, although I suspect that it would be a bit more challenging for the members of the community who would benefit most from opportunities of that kind.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire has done us a great service in initiating this timely debate. I hope that its strategic aspects have been heard and understood on the Treasury Bench, and will be acted on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I shall need to start the winding-up speeches at about 4.30 pm. Three Members are still waiting to speak. So far the speeches have been running at about 13 minutes, but I am afraid I must ask Members to confine themselves to about seven minutes if everyone is to get in.

4.6 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I shall be happy to accommodate your request, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for securing the debate. Her framing of this issue—her description

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

of it as an energy trilemma—is typical of her shrewd and clear thinking: it does an excellent job of setting out the nature of the challenge. I was delighted to be able to feed into the report that she produced, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), on deep geothermal and mine water technology.

This issue is more important than ever. The western world has come to learn, in an abrupt and challenging way, the cost of relying on states such as Russia for energy supplies. The record of Europe in this regard, and that of Germany in particular, will be viewed through the long lens of history as naive, and I am glad to see Europe now united in understanding the importance of prioritising our security—energy or otherwise.

I know that these Backbench Business debates are held in a less party political spirit than others, but I must say that I have been surprised by what the Opposition have had to say about this issue in recent months. Let me remind them, and the House as a whole, that it was Tony Blair who said, during an EU-Russia investment conference that he chaired in 2005, that increasing reliance on Russian oil and gas was not something to be concerned about. Both Mr Putin and Mr Blair insisted that the EU's growing reliance on Russia for energy would not compromise the ability of EU leaders to express concerns, and that our economic futures were “bound together”. Opposition Members should remember that.

I have also noted with interest that it seems that the original Captain Hindsight, the Leader of the Opposition, has now been joined by a lieutenant in the form of the shadow Energy Secretary, whom I notified that I would mention him. When I looked through *Hansard* to find his contributions over the last few years, I was shocked to discover that he had not spoken about energy security in 2021, or in 2020, or in 2019; in fact, he had not spoken about it for 10 years when he finally did so in March 2022. Maybe he has spoken about it elsewhere and I have missed it. I can, however, confirm that the shadow Minister has been much more successful in that regard, raising the matter repeatedly. Perhaps he should put in for a job from the Leader of the Opposition.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Would the hon. Member like an edited copy of the speeches that I have made about energy security over the years? I think he might find something useful there.

Dr Mullan: As I explained, the hon. Member has a good track record. I was talking about the shadow Energy Secretary—as he was called until recently. I apologise if I did not make myself clear; I thought that I had. As I said, I think the Opposition should be cautious in their criticism of us. I make that point not to suggest that they have been unacceptably slow in this regard, but to show how, across the western world, we politicians have been too slow to recognise the danger and too quick to work with Russia.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire clearly laid out, we must find a path forward. Many of us in the House have advocated a variety of approaches, and I encourage the Government to be ambitious and innovative. I want to use the rest of

my speech to talk about one technology that I think can help us meet the demand of the energy trilemma: deep geothermal heat and energy.

Deep geothermal heat and energy is an environmentally friendly, dependable and cost-effective source of heat and energy that can be found right under our feet. The technology is based on relatively simple concepts: first, that heat radiates from the earth's interior; secondly, that while it dissipates once it reaches the surface, the heat remains significant at depths accessible with current drilling technology; and thirdly, that water can be used to absorb and transmit that heat to the surface.

Those mechanisms are what heat hot springs, most famously demonstrated in the UK by the Roman baths. Iceland has uniquely conducive geology and enjoys vast utilisation of geothermal energy. While natural occurrences of any significance are relatively rare, boreholes can be drilled to access this natural resource.

Deep geothermal energy heats 250,000 homes in Paris, and across France more than 600 MWh of heat is produced annually as the Government aim to increase the number of schemes by 40% by 2030. Munich is pouring in €1 billion through to 2035 to develop geothermal energy and make the city's heating carbon neutral. Germany already produces more than 350 MWh of heat annually, and its Government are targeting at least 100 new geothermal projects.

The primary method by which we assess the scale of the opportunity for geothermal heat in Great Britain is geological temperature data collected from petroleum borehole data, mining records and a number of boreholes drilled as part of geothermal studies. I have been introduced to deep geothermal technology since my election as Member of Parliament for Crewe and Nantwich in December 2019, and my research has encouraged me to see its potential. Theoretically, it is able to provide enough heat energy to meet all our heating needs for at least 100 years, and even a conservative estimate of what we could utilise suggests that it could provide 15,000 GWh of heat for the UK by 2050.

In the UK, perhaps because of our past success in drilling for oil and gas and our status as a world leader for cheap wind and solar, we have fallen further behind on geothermal. But getting to net zero by 2050 in such a way that we share the proceeds of investment and utilise as much of our existing skills and workforce as possible will require us to pull every lever, and deep geothermal is an important one that will help us in the transition from oil and gas with our existing industries.

Like wind and solar were at the outset, schemes in Europe have been supported by things such as insurance and incentive schemes from Governments. I think it is the lack of such schemes in the UK that has led us to fall behind. I do not think the industry is asking for the open-ended subsidies that were originally in place for wind and solar, but a time-limited, targeted scheme of support would make a difference. I was pleased to see the set-aside in contracts for difference for tidal power and the green gas support scheme, which mirror the sort of thing that the industry is asking for.

I was delighted to be asked by the Prime Minister to conduct a review of geothermal technology and its potential in the UK. I am pleased to say that the first draft has been completed, and the report should be published shortly. It contains interesting figures on the

potential overlap with levelling up, and I look forward to sharing the findings with the Secretary of State and the rest of the ministerial team.

Whether the technology is deep geothermal or nuclear, tidal or hydrogen, there are opportunities to create jobs, grow our economy and make us more secure. I look forward to seeing us drive this agenda forward, for the benefit of my constituency and the whole country.

4.13 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for securing this important debate. We do indeed face a worrying trilemma as we seek to balance energy affordability with security of supply and sustainability. I believe the solution lies in clean energy, with renewables generated here in the UK tackling security concerns. As the renewables sector develops, prices come down.

One cannot talk about energy without being aware of the source of our current focus: Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Even though we were not directly reliant on gas from Ukraine, our reliance on fossil fuels links our energy prices intrinsically to the international market, which shot up post invasion.

Under this Government, huge strides towards green, sustainable energy sources have been taken. The UK is ranked fourth out of 127 countries on the world energy trilemma index, our energy generation in the last decade having reversed from 40% coal in 2012 to 40% renewables last year. We need to continue this drive towards affordable, sustainable energy generated in the UK. But is renewable always sustainable, and is sustainable always renewable?

Living somewhere as beautiful as North Devon, where we have renewable energy sources in abundance—the wind rarely stops blowing, we have massive tides and the sun shines most of the year—it is no wonder that locals look to community energy and are increasingly bewildered that they cannot plug their solar panels into the grid. I know the new Department is working to upgrade our grid, but the pace of that is reducing our ability to move more rapidly towards our own energy supply. We must rapidly improve access to the grid for small businesses and farmers who wish to generate energy using solar or wind turbines on their property, and who wish to sell the excess back to the grid or hope that battery storage technology will rapidly catch up to enable them to use the energy later.

Community energy is hugely popular. While recognising the grid constraints that may limit the feasibility of supply in some parts of the country, I hope we can find ways to enable sites that generate low-carbon electricity on a small scale to export their energy to an electricity supplier on fair terms. Larger suppliers should work with community schemes to sell the power they generate to local customers. Amendments to this effect have been tabled in the Lords, and I hope steps can be taken to accommodate the amendments regionally, where viable, and to explain why that cannot happen in other regions. What is being done to progress these measures, which have cross-party support from almost half the MPs in this House?

Localised schemes tend to be supported, and innovative biomass schemes, such as the chicken dung generator in South Molton in my constituency, help local farmers

while generating enough energy for the town. But is all biomass equal? Small biomass schemes that use local resources are, indeed, sustainable and, through replication, potentially scalable. I would argue, as would numerous eminent scientists, that biomass generation involving 4 million trees a year, shipped around the world on diesel vessels, is neither sustainable nor scalable.

Woody biomass energy generation in sparsely populated countries with large forested areas may be able to claim sustainability, but, in a country that is already importing wood to build houses because of the low levels of forestation, that is not the case. Not only do we need to build homes and furniture, but much can be built from the same waste wood currently burnt for energy, which is causing surging wood prices, not to mention that burning wood releases carbon into the atmosphere, whereas building retains the carbon in the product.

We need to ensure that we are accurately calculating the true carbon costs of our different energy sources, including the costs of bringing the raw materials to the site of energy production. As we go through the current transition to a cleaner and more secure energy supply, we clearly need many different energy sources, but we also need to be honest about the true environmental costs of some of the decisions we are taking, and we need to ensure we have a strategy that increasingly relies on affordable, home-grown energy sources that are genuinely sustainable.

Genuine renewables are, indeed, sustainable. Some of the newer sources, such as floating offshore wind, are themselves dealing with inflationary pressures. Although I warmly welcome the Department's commitment to floating offshore wind, and recognise that annual auction rounds will attract more developers into the market, the progress of allocation round 5 has, to date, not been smooth. As chair of the APPG for the Celtic sea, I am delighted that today we have seen the announcement of the Celtic freeport and remain optimistic that the announcement on funding for ports will recognise the importance of supply chains to securing fantastic jobs all around the Celtic sea—not to mention that, although the wind does not always blow, it blows the other way round in the Celtic sea, to the north-east, which is why it is vital that multiple schemes progress tangentially.

There is great optimism about the future of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and that the current round's budget can be extended to recognise the increase in the number of schemes ready to progress, but this does not tackle the damage already done due to the nature of the negotiations. Developers have repeatedly expressed concern that the strike price in this round is too low. I recognise that this is a complex negotiation and that there is an element of who blinks first, but to retain our world-leading position in the sector we need to recognise that other international opportunities are rapidly opening up for the same companies. Why would they invest here if they start with a cripplingly low strike price? Developers that have already invested many millions of pounds into these schemes have been told that officials do not believe their figures and would rather let the round fail than discuss the price—not to mention that it is not all about price, as this debate clearly highlights. Floating offshore wind is fundamental to our longer-term energy security. As we have seen with other sectors, new technologies need a leg up to get them up and running.

[Selaine Saxby]

I struggle to understand how we are now committed to developing a Celtic sea supply chain, yet have possibly created an auction round that may see no projects progress in the Celtic sea. The Spanish Government recently saw a round more or less fail because of a similar failure to recognise the inflationary pressures developers are under. One investor has already publicly stated:

“UK Offshore is over for us now”.

I fear that we are sleepwalking into a missed opportunity, with unintended long-term issues with developers. I hope that no one needs to blink and that with eyes wide open we can work with the developers to ensure that multiple projects progress in this round.

We have come so far, led by this Government. I hope that the new Department will continue this journey, recognising that it is already named to tackle energy security and sustainability. I know that, given the huge amount of financial support already given to consumers and businesses, affordability is drummed into everything it does. I hope that this tripod approach continues and that legs do not get lopped off in problematic negotiations as we move through the transition from fossil fuels to a cleaner, greener, cheaper and more secure future energy supply.

4.20 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): First, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for securing this debate and for being a fantastic chair of the 1922 Back-Bench business committee. It has been an honour to be her vice-chair. As she mentioned, the committee has looked in detail at the challenges of the energy trilemma over the past year. Like her, I am delighted that the Government have agreed with our analysis that energy issues have moved up the agenda so far that they merit a stand-alone Department.

The trilemma of the cost of energy, energy security and achieving our net zero ambitions affects every household and every business in every corner of the globe. Policy changes have emerged in reaction to the impact on energy costs of Russia's war on Ukraine. The price of gas and electricity has spiralled, and much of our thinking has been dominated by the challenges of cost and energy security. Renewable energy created here in the UK, as a domestic source of energy, will not only reduce our reliance on international fossil fuel markets that can be influenced by bad faith actors, but offer great opportunities for green jobs and growth right across the UK. There is potential to revitalise UK manufacturing to support the growing supply chain in pursuing energy sovereignty.

Offshore wind will be the backbone of the UK's future electricity system. In 2020, solar and wind produced nearly 30% of the UK's electricity, which represents a nearly tenfold increase on the level in 2010. However, we know the wind does not always blow and the sun does not always shine. As renewables become a bigger share of the market, this intermittency problem will become a bigger issue, particularly when we are trying to get above 80% to 90% low-carbon generation. In part, onshore wind and solar have a role to play in this. Despite it being one of the cheapest sources of power, onshore wind still faces barriers to development. Therefore,

it is a welcome shift in Government policy to consult on devolving planning decisions on new onshore wind in England to local authorities, to enable onshore wind to be installed where communities want it and with their benefiting.

Intermittency can also be mitigated by changing the design of the UK's electricity market. Today, there is a single national price for electricity across the whole of the UK. Moving to a system of local pricing in the electricity market would also incentivise building production capacity closer to demand, thus reducing the overall amount of infrastructure. Other solutions to intermittency exist. We can do more to encourage investment in short-term storage such as batteries, and long-term, inter-seasonal storage, for instance, hydrogen storage and hydropower.

The recent inquiry by the 1922 Back-Bench business committee heard from witnesses on barriers to deploying energy projects in the UK, which include the planning system and delays in connecting to the electricity grid. Members will forgive me, but being from Stoke-on-Trent I have to give the ceramics industry as an example here. Many UK ceramics businesses could make the switch from gas to electricity for the firing of the kilns, but several hurdles block that, one being that the cost and time delays for connection through distribution network operators make it prohibitive. Whether the energy is gas, electricity or perhaps, in future, hydrogen, security of supply is critical. Kilns are designed to slowly warm up and cool down. If the energy is suddenly cut off, the damage to the kilns can be irreparable. That means that a method of storing renewably generated energy must be found that enables us to deliver a consistent and continuous supply.

To address the energy trilemma, we also need to think seriously about how to transition effectively to clean energy, and about sustainability and our net zero goals. To achieve net zero, the UK needs to decarbonise its power sector by 2035. While emissions from electricity generation have fallen by 69% since 2010, we still have a long way to go to achieve that goal. That is why the first part of our Back-Bench report looked at ways to unblock renewables. My neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), mentioned deep geothermal, which uses the high temperatures and pressure deep inside the Earth. There are no fully operational deep geothermal plants in the United Kingdom, but there are two close to completion in Cornwall, and I am delighted that my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central is also destined to be an early adopter. As the city of pits and pots, we have a long history of energy-intensive industries, which also means a history of innovation in energy efficiency. Just as our potteries will move from being coal-fired to gas-fired, so we must be at the forefront of the next energy revolution and embrace geothermal energy, which has great potential.

Another recent project in which I have been involved is the Commission for Carbon Competitiveness, an effort to explore how the UK can reach net zero without undermining the competitiveness of British industry. Our industries can play a key role in the transition to net zero by investing in new technologies that are vital to decarbonisation. However, we are not operating on a level playing field; they face international rivals who can dominate supply chains without having to worry about net zero regulations or environmental targets. It is

important that the challenge be addressed, so that we can transform our energy-intensive industries and industrial communities, and so that they become the nexus for green growth, and not the victims of an inevitable decline.

My final issue is the cost of energy. I have lobbied the Government on behalf of local energy-intensive industries in Stoke-on-Trent Central, and on behalf of small businesses and charities that are struggling with their bills, and I welcomed Government support for families faced with a choice between heating and eating. However, the need to choose between energy and food extends to food production, too. Horticulture businesses decided to postpone early crop production where the cost of heating the growing environment was unaffordable. That, combined with crop failure due to extreme weather conditions in continental Europe and north Africa, led to UK supermarkets having gaps in their fruit and vegetable sections. Given that we are looking to reduce the air miles in our food system in support of our ambitions to decarbonise and move towards net zero, we need to produce more in the UK, and British farmers need support with energy costs. We need to rebalance our food production and accept that the UK's cheap food culture is unsustainable.

As a result of the rise in the cost of production, the percentage of household income spent on food and non-alcoholic drinks has risen from 10% in 2021 to 16% this year. Before the cost of living increases, Britain spent less on food and non-alcoholic drinks than any other country in Europe, and our diet has remained the highest in fat, salt and sugar. We need a fundamental recalibration of the value that we place on a healthy diet, and we need to accept that growth in local food production comes at a price worth paying.

If we get it right, the energy trilemma will create new opportunities to grow the economy, achieve our net zero ambitions, and guarantee affordable, reliable and sustainable energy for the future. This is the moment to embrace a green industrial revolution.

4.28 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate. I must admit that I did not realise when she secured the debate that I would effectively be responding to a Tory Back-Bench 1922 committee report. It comes as an even greater surprise to me that I agree with the recommendations she has raised. She did say that there were 30-odd recommendations, though. She did not go through them all—I thank her for that—but I suspect that I would find some among them that I disagree with.

As I say, I agree with the right hon. Lady on the points that she brought forward. We really do have to unlock renewables, and I agree about the need to reduce demand. One way to do that is to increase energy efficiency installations; the Government must really ramp up action on that. One thing I would say to the Minister is that I am now getting feedback that the roll-out through ECO4 is not going as quickly as suppliers would like it to go; they are already behind on progress this year, so maybe we need to look at ways to target the right homes for energy efficiency upgrading.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire obviously took credit for the creation of the new stand-alone Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. I welcome that new Department; to be honest, it was long overdue, but at least it now seems to have the right priority within Government. I also completely agree about the number of grid upgrades that will be required. We need much better forward planning, and it was certainly an eye-opener when she said that we had seven times the amount of infrastructure still to be built. There is no doubt that Ofgem has failed on that. National Grid ESO confirmed two weeks ago to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that it paid £4 billion in constraint payments last year. That is effectively £4 billion wasted that could have gone towards grid upgrades, storage or other mechanisms, and it shows how Ofgem needs to get a grip on the issue and allow anticipatory investment.

We need to imagine what the grid will be required to look like in 2050 and start planning for that now. I am concerned at the piecemeal approach that has been taken; even when the grid has been upgraded, we are building in future constraints already instead of putting in the right capacity. That will cost more money in the long run and block renewables from coming online.

I must say I also welcome the right hon. Lady's conversion to referendums. She will find that on the SNP side we completely agree with the need for referendums, and I look forward to her support on that matter. I was also glad to hear her compliment the independent advice body Home Energy Scotland, and it would be good to see a completely independent body set up in England to give free and impartial advice and help people to get the measures required.

It is no surprise that I agree with the points my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made. He is right that the IPCC report highlights the urgency to take action now, before it is too late. He also highlighted the fact that investment is relocating to the United States where there is momentum because of the Inflation Reduction Act. Meanwhile, here we have the electricity generator levy, but no renewables investment allowance. We really need to look at some form of that. My right hon. Friend obviously mentioned the Skilling report, the opportunity potentially to scale up to 80 GW of green electricity generation in Scotland and how important that could be in a just transition, creating 300,000-plus new jobs.

I also agree with my right hon. Friend on tidal stream. I have been trying to highlight the issues with the funding pot announced for AR5—it is definitely not enough money, especially with inflationary pressures. MeyGen in the Pentland Firth is the biggest tidal stream site in the world, but it has confirmed that it now faces inflation pressures of +50% on the AR4 strike rate that it bid against. The only way that that project can grow is if it gets to scale up through a bigger proportion agreed in AR5, and for that there needs to be a much bigger budget. I am pleased to say that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury has agreed to meet me next week, and I will certainly make the case for at least £40 million, which is what I have been asking for.

In a real twist, I agreed with the points made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). There is no doubt that we will still be using oil and gas in 2050 and will still need to utilise them as an asset.

[Alan Brown]

As he rightly said, Scotland is a net exporter of oil and gas. In fact, it supplied almost 50% of the UK's gas consumption last year and 75% of the oil.

When we talk about energy security, though, we must be realistic and accept that, while even a lower percentage increase in production for the North sea increases energy security, that oil and gas can be traded on the international market and does not necessarily come directly into the UK market. There has been a 30% reduction in oil refinery capacity in the UK since 2010, so even a lot of the oil for use in end products here has to go abroad to be refined and then come back. The security issue is not quite straightforward, but I agree that that is an asset we must continue to utilise.

Mr Carmichael: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: It will need to be very brief.

Mr Carmichael: What view does the hon. Gentleman take, then, of the Scottish Government's current consultation on presumption against future development?

Alan Brown: There is no harm in consulting. We need to look at that and have proper climate compatibility checks—I think that is the right way to go about it.

I agree with the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan about direct air capture, which could, of course, play a role as part of the wider Acorn cluster, but I repeat that, with £20 billion announced for carbon capture and storage, it is disappointing that we are still waiting to hear any firm commitments on Acorn. The Budget mentioned a possible track 1 expansion, so can the Minister advise me on whether Acorn might be included in that this year, or will it rely on track 2? If so, when will we hear an announcement about the track 2 process?

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly mentioned the fantastic EMEC facility. I urge the Government to come forward with funding to replace EU funding and keep EMEC going. He said that he was not too sure about nuclear. My views on nuclear are well known, but I repeat that I am completely against it. Hinkley is costing £33 billion; Sizewell C will cost something like £35 billion. Think what we could do with that money in energy storage, energy efficiency and even grid upgrades. That £35 billion is just a waste of money. Sizewell C will not be constructed for 12 to 15 years, and there is not even one successful EPR project in the world. SMRs are being promoted, but there is not even an approved SMR design in the UK. Rolls-Royce tells us that it will somehow get them up and running by 2029, but that is a fallacy when the regulator has not even approved the design yet. At £2 billion a time, SMRs are not exactly cheap, and that money could be better spent elsewhere.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) made a good point about the potential for geothermal, and I agree with him. We have a lot of former mineworking areas in Scotland and other areas of the UK, and they could be a place to start on the potential for geothermal. It would be good to see Government support for that.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) mentioned community energy, an effective Local Electricity Bill, and amendments to the Energy Bill. Certainly, I have been a supporter of the Local Electricity Bill.

I would be happy to consider that on a cross-party basis when the Energy Bill comes to the House of Commons.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) mentioned intermittency issues. Yes, we need to deal with them, but that can be done with pumped-storage hydro, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned. All that is required to get Coire Glas over the finishing line for final investment and approval is a green cap and floor mechanism for revenue stabilisation. Some £1.5 billion will be fully funded by SSE Renewables—no subsidy or Government guarantees have been asked for; just the revenue stabilisation mechanism.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire made a good analogy, which everyone picked up on, and I agree with her, but although we are calling it the energy trilemma, we also need to look at it as an opportunity—the opportunity that comes with decarbonisation, green energy, new jobs, just transition and by bringing bills down in the long run. We have to grasp that opportunity to have a truly green renewable energy grid supplying homes across the UK.

4.38 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This has been an interesting debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on securing it. I thought that it was about tackling the energy trilemma, so I have prepared all sorts of interesting things about the energy trilemma and how it works. However, although the contributions have been interesting, the debate has not necessarily been about the energy trilemma.

The right hon. Lady spent a lot of her contribution talking about the 1922 Back-Bench committee report on energy, which sounds very interesting. Indeed, it appears to contain quite crucial insights, particularly on the need for speeding up the planning system as far as grid development is concerned, speeding up connections, and developing new connections and ring main in offshore wind. As far as I am concerned, those things are crucial to delivering the rest of our green agenda. I can offer her a slogan, “no transition without transmission”, which she might want to put on the front of a future report. They are crucial insights, and it would be a good idea for her to provide a submission to the Labour party national policy forum on this, because she would get a better hearing than she would from the present Government.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the three-legged stool. This is about how we achieve our net zero outcomes while taking the whole question of affordability and of energy security along with us as we go. This is not a zero-sum game. It is not the case that if we consider affordability and security, we take away from our net zero ambitions. After all, we in this House already decided which of those legs we are going for most strongly when we decided on net zero as our target as far as climate change is concerned. That means we have to consider the energy trilemma from the point of view of not whether we will get there but how we can get there with those other matters being taken into account.

I would prefer to put the question of energy security into a slightly different mode, and that is the one it was put in by the World Energy Council, which has done a lot of work on the energy trilemma as a tool for

deciding how we make progress in these areas together. It has produced an isosceles triangle—I am confident that the word “isosceles” has not been recorded in *Hansard* before—that has spines going to the centre of it, and we can advance further along to each corner from the centre with various elements of the energy trilemma in it. We have decided to advance substantially down the left-hand spine, which is the sustainability part of the triangle. The job we have to do is make sure that what happens with the other two legs does not draw back the sustainability leg but enhances it, which is exactly the point that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) made.

It also means we have to take decisions in other areas that are compatible with the particular length of spine we have gone down on that triangle. I would politely say to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) that, while it may be the case that the hydrocarbons we bring into the UK are more carbon-intensive than the ones we produce in the UK for transport reasons and others, they are still hydrocarbons. With what we have decided, yes, we are going to need oil and gas in our future economy, but in far smaller quantities than is the case in our economy at the moment. We have to think about the right use for oil and gas in our future energy economy, making sure that as much of that as possible is produced in the UK as opposed to importing, but also that the total that we have coming into the economy as a whole is compatible with that net zero goal on the left leg of the sustainability triangle.

David Duguid: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving me the chance to come back on that point. Surely he will recognise, as I think he did in his statement just now, that there will be a gap for some time, and that we need to keep that gap closed. As rapidly as we all want renewable and low-carbon energy to be developed, we need to make sure that that gap is closed, and that we do not become even more dependent on foreign imports than we already are.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we should not be dependent on foreign imports. However, we need to be thinking about a long-term overall reduction in what we are doing. I do not think that simply saying, “We’re going to increase oil and gas production over the next period” is an answer to our present problems, because in the end, that is incompatible with the commitments we have made on net zero. We cannot go down that path in the long-term future.

Dr Mullan: I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman say that he agrees that we should do as much of our own energy production as possible in the meantime, during the transition. Is that the official Labour party position—that we should be doing more oil and gas in this country while we’ve got to still be using it?

Dr Whitehead: No, what I said was that we should be trying to make sure that the reduced amounts of oil and gas that, in the end, we use in our system are as indigenous as they can be. That does not mean that we increase oil and gas production overall. We have to make sure that what we are doing in terms of our route to net zero and our energy provision for the future is secure and affordable.

For example, we are, I hope, on track to make our energy economy—for power—based pretty wholly on

renewables. Certainly, that is a Labour target for 2030;

[Dr Whitehead]

I think the official Government target is 2035. Of course, as hon. Members have mentioned, that means that we have to take account of what the issue is for variables in that energy economy. But, we should not back those up with a whole lot more oil and gas; we should back them up with things such as storage, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) mentioned, and methods of making sure that we can use our energy as flexibly as possible. Also, our variability must be accommodated by what we do alongside it to make the overall system work. That is actually working quite well so far, inasmuch as renewable energy is the cheapest form of energy there is at the moment. On the affordability criterion, we really are making progress on that front.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) mentioned the Celtic sea. If we expand our offshore renewables into the Celtic sea, we will have a further security addition to what our energy supplies are going to look like, which will make that second leg work very well as well. Those are the sorts of things we need to consider for the future in terms of how we solve the energy trilemma: not going backwards with higher hydrocarbons, but making the lower hydrocarbons that we have work as well as possible.

I was about to denounce the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) for being nasty to me, but I gather he was not being nasty to me, but to someone else entirely. I thought he greatly redeemed himself with his passionate espousal of deep geothermal energy, which is bang on. We need to do a lot more work on geothermal energy for precisely the reasons I have mentioned in terms of the energy trilemma in this country, as it is affordable and low carbon at the same time.

I thank hon. Members for this excellent debate this afternoon. By the way, in how we balance out the three legs of the World Energy Council trilemma tool, we are fourth in the world. That may be a free gift to the Minister, but it is something we are not doing badly on in this country as a whole.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I am going to go through my speech as fast as I can, because this has been an incredible debate. I would so much have liked to have had more time, but I want to allow my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) to come back in at the end.

I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. We have had an informed and interesting discussion. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire for bringing this important topic to the House. I also pay tribute to her for the important work she did in advancing the nation's energy and climate security as Secretary of State with responsibility for those matters, as well as in her role as Energy Minister prior to that. I welcome the work that she and other Members have been doing more recently to contribute to this policy debate.

I agree with my right hon. Friend about the creation of the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which I am sure that the whole House will welcome. It will deliver policies at the heart of the Government's agenda and tackle the energy trilemma. Indeed, the

Secretary of State was mindful of the trilemma as he laid out his priorities, which are:

"To set Britain on a path to energy independence, in other words, delivering energy security.

To bring bills down as soon as possible, and keep them down, so wholesale electricity prices are among the cheapest in Europe, delivering consumer security.

To decarbonise energy as part of our commitment to net zero, delivering climate security."

As the Minister with responsibility for energy consumers and affordability, I will be working hard with the Secretary of State to bring down energy bills for households and businesses and to tackle fuel poverty.

The Government have a clear plan to deliver our priorities, set out in our Energy White Paper, published in 2020, and in our "Net Zero Strategy", published in 2021. The British energy security strategy, published in April last year, charted a pathway to reducing our dependence on imported oil and gas and achieving net zero greenhouse emissions by 2050.

In the 2022 edition of the index, the UK was ranked fourth overall, as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) mentioned, ahead of G20 competitors including France, Germany and the United States. We are clearly doing something right. We should not consider the three aims of having secure, affordable and clean energy as being in competition with each other. In fact, enhancing security means decarbonising electricity, and both mean keeping energy bills affordable. To illustrate that point, I highlight the role that wind and solar play in our energy mix. They are not only the cleanest sources of power that we have, but the cheapest, and they contribute to our energy security by reducing our reliance on imported fuels.

I want to mention the contributions from a couple of other Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has a great depth of knowledge and brings real experience to the subject. He has a genuine commitment to the subject, and he mentioned carbon capture, usage and storage. That is a priority for the Government, and we are progressing as quickly as we can. The funding package announced at the Budget is unprecedented and demonstrates His Majesty's Government's strong commitment to delivering CCUS in the UK.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Solloway: I am so sorry, but I just do not have time.

I would particularly like to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who is a strong and consistent advocate for energy security and net zero. The UK currently does not have access to large naturally occurring geothermal resources that countries such as Iceland have, but I welcome the review he is doing and look forward to reading it.

To meet our ambitions on renewables, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire that we should accelerate the planning processes and networks infrastructure vital to bringing these projects to fruition. That is why the Government have committed to dramatically reducing timelines for delivering strategic onshore transmission network infrastructure by around three years, with an ambition to halve the end-to-end

process by the mid-2020s. We look forward to the report from the Electricity Networks Commissioner, Nick Winser, this summer, and will take action in response to his recommendations.

We are committed to ensuring that projects benefit not only the nation as a whole, but the communities in which they are built. Members rightly call for an electricity system that is smart and flexible, and by the end of 2022 there were 31.3 million smart and advanced meters across Great Britain. The flexibility of the system is underpinned by a growing pipeline of electricity storage projects, with nearly 23 GW of storage already online.

Members have rightly pointed out the crucial role in energy security of reducing consumption through targeted energy efficiency measures, and we are already off to a good start. In 2010, only 14% of homes were in energy performance band C or better, but thanks to Government and industry action, 46% of homes now meet this benchmark.

The Government are bringing all this work together through the Energy Bill, which is the vehicle for delivering our strategy. It will modernise the way that we heat people's homes, it will turbocharge British technology and it will liberate private investment, scaling-up jobs and growth.

To sum up, the UK is firing on all cylinders to deliver a green, resilient and independent energy system, with these three elements going hand in hand. As my right hon. Friend will know, the UK is a global leader not just in clean energy, but, as the energy trilemma index confirms, in cheap and secure energy. So it is only right that our ambition is to completely decarbonise our power system by 2035, subject to ensuring security of supply. This will provide the cheap, clean and British energy we need for decades to come.

4.57 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I would like to reflect what a fantastic debate this has been. I think it is very rare to find the spokesmen for the opposition parties actually agreeing with Conservative Members, and even in some cases suggesting they might like to join our Back-Bench 1922 committee—and they would be most welcome.

I think it is wonderful on such occasions that we see the House break out in agreement. As I said at the start of my remarks, this is perhaps the biggest challenge that faces not just the planet, but definitely the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said he believes in referendums. Well, I believe in energy sovereignty, and in all sorts of sovereignty for the United Kingdom, so we will have that little frisson of disagreement between us.

Generally speaking, it was wonderful to hear the many and varied views of all right hon. and hon. Members in this place. It demonstrates that, when we do get together and are determined to do something that is right for the world and our own country, we can really make swift progress. I urge the Government to take really seriously some of the submissions made today and to make very urgent progress on them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling the energy trilemma.

Heritage Assets: London

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jo Churchill.)

5 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): When I stood for election, I promised my constituents that I would be a strong local voice. This debate is at the heart of that promise. The Cities of London and Westminster sit in the heart of our nation's capital. It may be considered one of a handful of global cities, but to those of us who call it home it is also a group of local villages, with local people who are incredibly proud of their neighbourhood's history. Whether it is Covent Garden, the square mile, Marylebone, Pimlico, Hyde Park or the west end, heritage matters. Heritage matters for so many reasons, not least because of its significant pull factor for tourism. In London we see that on a magnified scale, with people coming from all over the world to visit our heritage buildings, palaces, iconic sites and parks, and enjoy our cultural offer. Places such as Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey will come into sharp focus later this year with the coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla. Right here, the Palace of Westminster, where we sit today, is a UNESCO world heritage site. I can therefore think of no better time for this debate, with this being English Tourism Week.

I recognise the incredible work that my hon. Friend the Minister's Department is doing to bolster UK tourism, especially since the pandemic. In particular, I applaud the Department's support for heritage and the arts including, of course, the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, and measures within the tourism recovery plan. I do so in large part because London's unique appeal lies in its ability for its heritage assets to tell the many stories of a 2,000-year-old city.

In London, our historic buildings are so common that it is easy for us to take them for granted without giving them a second thought, but without protection, those buildings may not be here in the future. That is made clear in Historic England's annual at-risk register, which highlights the critical health of England's most valued historic places. For those in the Cities of London and Westminster, such places have huge community importance, from the Buddhist temple in Margaret Street to the former Samaritan Hospital for Women in Marylebone, and the 18th-century church of St Mary Woolnoth in the City of London. Those are valued historic places, many of which, according to Historic England, are at risk of being lost.

In 2022, London had 421 listed buildings, 101 places of worship, 25 archaeological entries, 12 parks and gardens and 72 conservation areas that were at risk of neglect, decay or inappropriate change. Thankfully, many have been rescued thanks to heritage bodies and dedicated teams of volunteers, community groups, charities, owners and local government, all working together. For example, two historic buildings with heritage value were recently under threat in the two cities, but both were saved due to community action that I was delighted to fully support. I speak of Bevis Marks synagogue—the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the United Kingdom—and the historic Simpson's Tavern in Leadenhall, which is 250 years old and a constant in an ever-changing part of the City

[*Nickie Aiken*]

of London. Both were under threat, but local people stood up and said no to unfettered development, and yes to heritage.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady, who I spoke to beforehand, for securing this debate. She has said not a word that I do not fully support and see the need for. She is right to say that our heritage assets are historic and need to be retained and protected, and that can happen only through funding. She also referred to tourism. Our tourism goes across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we can all benefit. I encourage people to come to London for their holidays, and I am sure she encourages people to come to my constituency of Strangford for holidays. Whenever she comes, I suggest that she goes and visits Scrabo tower, an historic building that has been retained for two or three hundred years. It overlooks Strangford lough, and whenever I go home on the plane on a Thursday night—I usually head home then, but now it will be tomorrow morning—I see Scrabo tower and I know I am coming home, and it always does my heart good.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As he knows, I have visited Strangford several times and I plan to do so in the near future. It is a great and beloved place that is part of the United Kingdom.

We cannot rely solely on community action to protect our cultural assets. There are cases where local people and local government really make an effort to ensure we look after heritage assets—we saw that with the site of Smithfield market, which has been in place since the 14th century. It is now to be the home of the Museum of London, which is moving. The development plans pay a lot of attention to preserving the historic fabric of London for future generations, and I pay tribute to that. I appreciate that not everyone is happy to lose the meat market at Smithfield, but there are cases where development can be done well to create a new offer for the next generation.

There are also cases where people are still fighting to save their heritage. I share the concerns of Barbican residents about proposals to knock down and redevelop the former home of the Museum of London and Bastion House, and replace it with a major office development. I am delighted to work with the Barbican Association and Barbican Quarter Action to ensure local voices are heard by the City of London Corporation, and that these unique and important historic places are saved for community use, and, hopefully, housing. They are functional historic assets that serve their community and add to London's cultural offer. That is so important, because communities want to see their local heritage thrive.

Yes, concentrating on digital and tech is important for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, but we cannot afford to lose focus on the conservation of the country's cultural and historic heritage. Without that emphasis, heritage will be at risk. London is modernising, but tourism figures and local support underline the popularity of the historic landscape. People care passionately about their historic environment. They want to be involved in decisions about their heritage and how we manage change.

A good example of that recently was when constituents, as well as heritage experts and heritage bodies, wrote to me concerned that Westminster City Council was not, in their view, giving enough consideration to the historical significance of Victorian gas-powered lamps in its plans to replace them with LED replicas. There are now very few functioning gas lamps left in Westminster. Each, in its own right, is a work of art and a piece of our history, surviving the Blitz and London's urban revolution, but not all of them will survive due to the council's diktat to replace them with LED lamps.

Thankfully, the brilliant London Gasketeers, a fantastic group of locals, are rallying to save these historic lamps. I met the London Gasketeers on Maunsel Street in Westminster to show my solidarity with their cause, along with many locals. Many of those local people had never been part of a campaign before and they were delighted to support the London Gasketeers. The cause gained wide-ranging support: everyone from myself to the president of the GMB union—believe it or not—historians, actors, cabbies, heritage experts and, most importantly, a diverse mix of Westminster residents who care passionately about their local heritage. We have been successful. I pay tribute to the London Gasketeers and I am delighted to see many of them in the Public Gallery this afternoon.

Things like gas lamps might seem trivial to some, but like it or not, they are our material history. People care because Westminster's heritage belongs to everyone. Such things matter to our overall social landscape, and are so important because London is a city where history and modernity remain intrinsically linked. The same can be said for urban development. Consider Soho, which has always been characterised by its narrow streets that lend it a friendly, human scale. That is part of Soho's material history. However, the pavement licensing scheme, which might have been a great offer during covid as an emergency lifeline to many local restaurants and bars, could now have a detrimental effect on the historic streetscape if it becomes permanent without any protections in place. That is why I am calling on the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that guidance accompanying the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is clear about the conditions on which licences are granted. It is important that local councils have the flexibility to determine where it is appropriate to have a licence and where it is not.

Beyond the principal argument on access, we need to ensure that our streetscape is consistent with Soho's conservation area status, respecting Soho's unique history and character. We must preserve elements of material history and evolve sensitively in places that already have protection, such as Soho's conservation area, or deserve protection, such as Westminster's Victorian gas lamps or London's historic buildings and places.

The preservation of our heritage and cultural assets draws millions of tourists to London every year. A VisitBritain survey found that the vast majority of tourists see Britain as a place where heritage meets vibrancy and modernity. The same can be said of our cultural institutions, as 15% of international tourists attend a play, musical, opera or ballet. I am incredibly proud of the vibrant arts and culture offer in my constituency, much of which can be found in the historic west end, dating back to the 1600s. In fact, according to the Office for National Statistics, 8% of the UK's art

and culture businesses are based in the Cities of London and Westminster—around 2,500 businesses.

There is no doubt that the past few years have been extremely difficult for the arts and culture. The commercial uncertainty of the current climate has not helped. Rising global inflation and consistent train and tube strikes have all had a knock-on effect, hampering the recovery of this £2.4 billion sector. We saw during the pandemic the fragility of the industry. We cannot be complacent; we must protect our cultural assets. After all, heritage and theatre bring in £890 million a year, with more than 16 million people attending London theatres last year.

We need to work with the theatre sector in London to develop a strong UK talent pipeline, through investment in the arts premium and development of the culture education plan. My hope is that will mean that we can make sustainable, evidence-based decisions to conserve our culture and heritage while enabling people to enjoy them. While I am on this point, although London is not part of the new levelling-up agenda per se, it forms the heartbeat of British artists and culture. We risk losing those institutions at our peril. We saw that with Arts Council England's rash decision to cut funding to the English National Opera, based in the London Coliseum, not far from here. That decision would have seen the loss of a national icon that gave local people so much—not just world-class opera performances but local initiatives such as the ENO's Breathe programme, which supports people suffering with long covid.

I urge the Minister to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the arts and culture sector, and in particular the west end. We cannot forget the strength of the sector as an entrepreneurial and SME-led economic driver locally, nationally and globally. For those reasons, I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on the importance of protecting heritage assets in London.

Since London's founding in what is now the square mile in the City of London, this has been an ever-changing metropolis. Each generation has added its own personal touch, culminating in a hugely diverse and historic modern city. Now more than ever, it is our duty to ensure that we do not lose what makes London London. Therefore, we must be proactive in protecting our cultural assets, from the west end to the wider historic fabric of London, which is becoming increasingly under threat.

I urge the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to protecting our heritage assets for future generations, and ask that she work with London's cultural sector to stimulate growth, encourage tourism and safeguard the industry. London's historic assets are at risk of being lost to history; we cannot allow that happen.

5.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing a wonderful debate and for superbly highlighting London's great and rich heritage, its wonderful villages and, of course, the importance of protecting historic assets for the benefit of present and future generations.

Like her, I absolutely adore London's history. It is a pleasure to see her passion for her constituency again, after her contribution to last week's debate on the lease of London zoo. I responded to that debate, and am responding to this one, on behalf of Lord Parkinson,

who covers the arts and heritage portfolio for the Department. These are all fascinating diversions from my portfolio on data and digital infrastructure, and I am glad to say I have now taken on the tourism brief for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. With the creation of the new Department, tourism will play an increasingly important role within the work of DCMS.

As my hon. Friend said, our heritage is an essential part of our cultural landscape, our economy and our country. It is both globally renowned and world leading, playing a vital role in communities across the UK, making our places great to live in, work in and visit. She has a significant number of impressive heritage sites in her constituency, including the beautiful Westminster Abbey and the building in which we stand today. Her constituency contains more than 3,900 listed buildings, scheduled monuments and registered parks and gardens combined.

It is a fun coincidence, as my hon. Friend said, that the debate takes place during English Tourism Week. I hope she will agree that the UK's tourism offer is truly world class. I had the pleasure of visiting the Goring Hotel, in her constituency; the staff were complimentary about her efforts to champion the hotel sector and they are doing fantastic work supporting young people into hospitality jobs. As she highlighted, the sector has been tremendously resilient after some difficult years. As it is English Tourism Week, I pay tribute to everybody in that sector who has done such incredibly demanding work throughout the last three years.

Our tourism landscape is iconic, from historic buildings and incredible scenery to culturally vibrant cities and world-leading hospitality, and that is not just here in Westminster. I loved the earlier plug for Strangford by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I hope he will not mind if I encourage hon. Members to sample the delights of my own constituency of Hornchurch and Upminster, including the vibrant Queen's theatre. I note what my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said about levelling up, but I am pleased to say that the Queen's theatre was a beneficiary of levelling up within London, with a great grant from the Arts Council of England. We also have a wonderful green space in Dagnam Park, the Manor, as well as Thames Chase forest and heritage assets such as Upminster Tithe Barn and its windmill.

It is undeniable that heritage sites are vital to our tourism industry and a tangible way to showcase our rich history. Of course, we want these sites to be around in the future for our children and grandchildren to learn from and be inspired by.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It seems the theatre in the Minister's constituency was drawn out of the Arts Council lottery and won a prize. I am pleased to say that the theatres in my constituency also did not have their grants cut, but the loss of the London Coliseum and the English National Opera is a grave blow to London, and indeed to the whole country. Will the Government use their best endeavours to ensure that very misguided decision by the Arts Council is reconsidered?

Julia Lopez: I understand that hon. Members have made their feelings clearly known about ACE's decision on the ENO. I know that a number of meetings have taken place, and I believe that some transitional funding is there, but I believe that this will continue to be a subject of

[Julia Lopez]

ongoing discussion between the two organisations. I know that Lord Parkinson has been engaging with the issue.

We want to make sure we are protecting our historic buildings, statues and memorials. Local planning authorities are required to

“have regard to the desirability of preserving features of special architectural or historic interest”

in any building. Buildings, statues and memorials of more modest interest can also be locally listed by local planning authorities. We want to make sure that developers and local authorities take into account the integrity and preservation of heritage sites and the local area. When considering applications for planning permission, local authorities are required to take into account national policy. That includes a clear framework on proposals that are liable to result in substantial harm to, or loss of, a grade I or grade II listed building.

In some cases, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who retains the power to take over planning applications rather than letting the local authority take over, can take the final decision. That is done only in exceptional circumstances, but my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster will have seen a number of such cases in her constituency over the years.

I enjoyed my hon. Friend's reference to the Gasketeers campaign. As she set out, there is often a tension between development and heritage. That is brought into sharp relief by examples in her constituency, including the planned redevelopment of the City of London and of Liverpool Street station. As she articulately set out, there are also proposals to replace gas-powered lamps in Westminster with modern LED lighting. Just before this debate, I was at a tourism reception in this House at which a lady thrust into my hand a little card telling me that Beverley in the East Riding also has some of the oldest gas streetlamps still in situ. I give a shout-out to them—it seems that Westminster has a level of competition when it comes to heritage.

There are tensions between conserving the significance of historic buildings and modernising them to be fit for purpose for future generations. It is therefore vital that Historic England, which is our expert heritage adviser, and planning authorities work constructively with development teams to facilitate creative solutions to resolve some of those tensions.

I would like to name-check Tim Bryars, a key member of the Gasketeers campaign. I first came across Tim, who is a map and book seller in Cecil Court, during a campaign to save that gloriously unique street in Westminster; he then went on to sell me a beautiful silk pocket map of London in the 1800s, which I very much treasure. I commend him for his enthusiasm and for all the work of the Gasketeers' campaign. [Interruption.] Ah—hello, Tim.

I understand that, after concerted campaigning, pressure and support from my hon. Friend, the council has seen the light, or the gaslight, and has paused what it was doing. Heritage England has now offered to identify a way forward and is encouraging listing applications, which it will be prioritising. I understand that a site visit is being undertaken. It will also be engaging on the redevelopment plans for Liverpool Street station in my

hon. Friend's constituency; it will look especially at the station, but also at the Great Eastern Hotel. Having sat on the planning committee for the neighbouring borough of Tower Hamlets, I fully understand some of the tensions.

We have managed to save some parts of London's historic fabric from rather ugly and unpleasant development over the years. I am thinking of the campaigns on the Fruit and Wool Exchange. My hon. Friend also cited campaigns relating to Smithfield; I think back with some concern to some of the original proposals for Smithfield, which were not sympathetic. I genuinely believe that preserving that historic fabric can really enhance, and no doubt increase the value of, some developments. If a sensitive approach is taken, the protection of heritage and a developer's ability to make a profit should not need to be an either/or.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, it is a criminal offence to demolish a listed building or to carry out works of alteration or extension that affect its character without the permission of the local council. A recent example in which a local authority played a critical role was the reopening of the Tavern Inn, a London grade II listed pub, six years after its illegal demolition: the owners were ordered to rebuild it brick for brick following a planning enforcement ruling. It is hoped that such cases will prevent developers from demolishing other sites without the relevant permissions.

My hon. Friend will also be aware of Historic England's Heritage at Risk programme, which gives our Department a strategic, overarching view of the overall state of England's historic sites. It identifies the sites that are most at risk of being lost as a result of neglect, decay or inappropriate development. Historic England updates the Heritage at Risk register every year, and the end result is a dynamic picture of the sites most at risk and most in need of safeguarding for the future. As my hon. Friend said, there are 16 at-risk sites in her constituency, and Historic England is actively engaged with owners and local authorities to find solutions and ensure that repairs are made. I know that she will be watching those 16 sites like a hawk.

The protection of London's great heritage also extends to supporting the capital's vibrant theatre scene and cultural offerings. Recent Government funding has ensured that access to arts and culture is not limited to the bright lights of the west end, but can be experienced by everyone. Investment in theatres across the country has increased through the latest Arts Council England investment programme, in terms of both the number of organisations supported and the volume of funding, which is now more than £110 million each year for nearly 200 organisations. There were also some positive announcements in the Budget about the extension of tax reliefs. That is on top of the unprecedented £1.5 billion culture recovery fund, through which more than £270 million was given to support nearly 700 theatre organisations across England during the pandemic.

It goes without saying that the protection of heritage and cultural assets for the benefit of future generations requires people to work in those places, and for children to learn about and understand their heritage. We recognise the importance of cultural education for the future of our world-leading arts and culture sectors in the UK, and we think that all children should be entitled to take advantage of those enriching cultural opportunities. We

consider them to be an essential part of a broad and balanced education, supporting children's health, wellbeing and wider development. This is something about which I am particularly passionate, and I am working closely with Lord Parkinson in my Department and with the Department for Education to publish a cultural education plan later this year. The aim of the plan is to highlight the importance of high-quality cultural education in schools around the country, promoting its social value. As Minister for the creative industries, I also see it as critical to building our pipeline of talent into those industries, which suffer from skill shortages—as does the tourism industry.

We are committed to ensuring that our historic environment is properly protected, promoted and conserved

for the benefit of present and future generations, but also because it is that heritage that draws visitors from every corner of the world. Whether through the statutory functions that protect our most special historic buildings and ancient monuments or through the public bodies that it funds, such as Historic England, my Department seeks to protect and promote understanding of and access to our glorious historic environment.

Let me once again thank my hon. Friend for bringing the House's attention to this issue and for, as ever, being a truly passionate advocate for London's heritage.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 March 2023

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Whistleblowing Awareness Week

1.30 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Whistleblowing Awareness Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I am pleased to be here today to consider Whistleblowing Awareness Week. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for whistleblowing, I would like to recognise the work of our secretariat, WhistleblowersUK, and other partners and supporters in bringing together a programme of events to mark the UK's first Whistleblowing Awareness Week.

What is Whistleblowing Awareness Week? In short, it is a celebration of the people and organisations who work hard to do the right thing and shine a light on abuse, corruption, fraud, patient safety concerns and other wrongdoing that would otherwise continue to go unchecked. It is a chance to use the past to shape the future, and to acknowledge what works and what needs to change. It is an opportunity to demonstrate how reforming existing legislation with a new whistleblowing law would put the public interest first and ensure that UK standards are global standards.

We need standards that protect whistleblowers by empowering people to speak up and normalising doing so, investigating concerns, stopping wrongdoing and saving money. We need to have penalties—this must have teeth—that incentivise organisations to do the right thing, and education and access to help and support people and organisations.

Why do we need to raise awareness? Whistleblowers are often described as the canary in the coal mine. What an analogy that is; we all know that the canary suffers in order to let people know that there is a problem. Whistleblowers are ordinary people who see something that is wrong and speak up to stop it, with an expectation that those who have the authority to do something will put things right. It is a fair expectation, but, sadly, it is often far from the reality.

Very often, others in an organisation are also aware of the wrongdoing, but only one person has the courage to speak out and to keep speaking out—the person who will not be fobbed off. This is the person with integrity, who believes in policy and procedures, who believes that the organisation they work for wants to know, and who believes that it will act to stop wrongdoing and protect others from abuse or harm.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I hope to speak in the debate later, so I will keep my intervention short. Does my hon. Friend feel that we need some sort of cultural shift and cultural change that creates a safer

space, with the attitude that whistleblowing is not bad, but can actually help an organisation, society and individuals?

Mary Robinson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know that when people do not speak out, it is because of the culture. We have seen that this week with the report on the Metropolitan police, which I will go on to consider later. She is entirely right that the culture in organisations needs to be changed. I believe that that culture change needs to be led by a change in our legislation.

Name an industry or a sector, and I can name a scandal brought to light by whistleblowers, who have been stifled, ignored or gaslit rather than listened to, and who have then been bullied and harassed out of their jobs. People who see that happening think twice about blowing the whistle. Unfortunately, as my right hon. Friend has rightly said, all too often people who could and should speak out fear the culture in an organisation and are silenced by it, with devastating results.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, and we are listening with great interest. I congratulate her on securing this debate and on all her campaigning work on whistleblowing over the past few years, for which we are really grateful. Regrettably, I am unable to stay and make a speech, although I would have liked to do so. I apologise; I am on the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill Committee at 2 o'clock, but I shall read the rest of her speech and the other contributions with great interest.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we all have a duty to encourage individuals to come forward to highlight such issues and to be whistleblowers when they see something wrong? The awareness week will help us get that publicity.

Mary Robinson: My right hon. Friend has got right to the heart of this matter. If people do not know that they can come forward, or if they are in an organisation with a culture of fear and cover-up, they will not. Whistleblowing Awareness Week is about ensuring that people know what they can do, and about making organisations aware that they need to change. I am pushing for changes to legislation, as the Minister knows from our conversations—it is great to have him here today. My right hon. Friend is entirely right; it is about the culture in organisations.

The publication this week of Baroness Casey's report into the Metropolitan police lays bare the tragic consequences of a culture of fear and cover-up, but if it were not this report, there would be another story in the headlines this week exposed by a whistleblower—or worse.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. The Casey review highlights a very specific example that shows why this debate is so important. Sir Mark Rowley, the commissioner of the Metropolitan police, says he believes that he cannot sack officers who are either convicted of or under investigation for criminal offences. Why would whistleblowers come forward if there is no positive consequence to their actions?

Mary Robinson: That is at the heart of the problem. If people see that nothing is going to happen, why would they come forward? If they see that somebody is

[*Mary Robinson*]

going to be bullied out of their job, why would they come forward? If they see that complaints or information about wrongdoing that they take to their senior leadership will not be acted on, why would they come forward? That is exactly at the heart of the problem.

We need to consider not just the impact of whistleblowers coming forward, making a complaint and letting people know what is going on, but also the impact of not doing that. We need to consider the impact when there is somebody in the police force who is known to indulge, or suspected of indulging, in bad or criminal behaviour, but nothing is done, nobody speaks out and the leadership does not act.

For this Whistleblowing Awareness Week, participants at a series of events in Westminster have heard from a wide range of whistleblowing experts from across the globe—legal, financial and human resources professionals, and those who have turned their lived, first-hand experience into action and passion for change. On Tuesday morning, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) chaired a roundtable on whistleblowing in the healthcare sector. I hope she will speak about that later. We heard from a range of experts, including the national guardian for freedom to speak up in the NHS, Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark. That role came out of the recommendations of the 2015 “Freedom to Speak Up” report by Sir Robert Francis KC, which found that NHS culture did not always encourage staff to speak up or facilitate their doing so. That failure had a direct and negative impact on patients and staff.

Time and again, we have seen the impact of that failure in health trusts across the country: people have been impacted by scandals and lives have been lost in tragic circumstances. The national guardian is tasked with leading the change in NHS culture—look, it must change. Her most recent report includes many positive voices, which is good, but it also highlights that 58.3% of freedom to speak up guardians believe that barriers to speaking up include the concern that nothing will be done, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) said. Alarming, 69% believe that a fear of retaliation or suffering as a result of speaking out is a deterrent. Clearly, there is more to be done to break down these barriers.

Patient safety depends on the success of a speaking-out culture, and that should sit alongside a learning culture where mistakes are not covered up for fear of blame. Doctors, nurses and other staff in healthcare settings have lives in their hands and they must feel comfortable, confident and able to report errors and mistakes.

It is often the whistleblowers themselves who give the most powerful testimony. Dr Chris Day is not only a whistleblower—he raised serious patient safety concerns while working as a junior doctor in an intensive care unit—but a change maker who exposed a gap in whistleblowing law that was subsequently reformed. After having blown the whistle on the understaffing that he witnessed, there was another battle on his hands: who can be held to account under existing legislation? As a junior doctor, his training and career were in the hands of Health Education England, who argued that as it did not directly employ Dr Day, the law did not apply to it. He challenged that, and the court found that junior doctors did come under the extended definition

of worker. It also found that a worker could have two employers under whistleblowing legislation. Although the issues that he raised as a whistleblower have not been resolved, Dr Day’s actions have resulted in a change to the law.

During our roundtable on Wednesday this week, exploring the new approach to whistleblowing, we heard from Jonathan Taylor, who exposed bribery in the oil and gas industry. Although his disclosures resulted in SBM, a Dutch multinational, paying out more than \$800 million in fines and related payments, his whistleblowing also put a stop to an economic crime that had run to hundreds of millions. A statistic that is shared many times in Parliament, including by me, is that 43% of economic crime is detected and exposed through whistleblowers. The Minister has previously said he believes that about 100% of economic crime detection could be attributed to whistleblowing. So, if we want to know where economic crime is being committed, we need to encourage whistleblowers and others to speak out.

However, speaking up came at a huge personal and professional cost to Mr Taylor. Not only did he spend a year under house arrest in Croatia, but he lost his career. We cannot overestimate the mental and emotional toll that whistleblowing has on people, and he is not alone in his experience. It is no wonder, after having heard the detriment suffered by so many whistleblowers, that people are averse to speaking up.

We also had the pleasure of welcoming Zelda Perkins, who, in breaking her non-disclosure agreement, shone a light on sexual abuse in Hollywood and helped to expose a top film executive who would later be prosecuted for sexual assault and rape. She went on to co-found the Can’t Buy My Silence campaign, which seeks to make NDAs unenforceable except in the case of preventing the sharing of confidential business information and trade secrets, which was their original purpose. The campaign’s efforts contributed to the Department for Education’s introduction of its pledge to end the use of NDAs in universities. That is progress, but we need to go further.

NDAs are often used not just to settle employment disputes, but to silence people. Fraud, corruption, incompetence, environmental damage, abuse, avoidable deaths and cover-ups are silently buried through the use of those agreements. Instead, I would like to bury the use of NDAs for that purpose. We have a situation where some people want to speak up but are bound by such legal agreements, and we have others who could speak but fear reprisals and repercussions. Either way, wrongdoing goes unchallenged. So now what?

Baroness Casey’s Met police review highlights systemic and chronic problems that can arise across any organisation where there is a culture of fear and cover-up. We have a police force riddled with misogyny, racism and homophobia, with inadequate management structures, a lack of leadership and a culture of fear. She describes an organisation where:

“The culture of not speaking up has become so ingrained that even when senior officers actively seek candid views, there is a reluctance to speak up.”

Whistleblowers must have trust and confidence in internal processes, but whistleblowers often come from outside these organisations. I remain concerned that our lack of an inclusive and effective whistleblowing law will continue to hinder progress.

Colleagues may know that last year I brought forward a private Member's Bill that would reform our whistleblowing legislation. Although it fell because of lack of time, I remain determined to see changes to how we support, encourage and protect the brave people who are prepared to speak out and report wrongdoing. The Bill proposed to create an office of the whistleblower, which would be responsible for setting, monitoring and enforcing standards in the management of whistleblowing cases. The office would provide advice services and a clear avenue for disclosure, and it would direct investigations and handle redress for whistleblowers. Importantly, it would support anyone blowing the whistle.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes it clear that whistleblowing can affect anyone, no matter what organisation they are attached to. Does she agree that that is why we need some changes to the legislative framework to ensure this much-needed change happens? Cultural change alone will not do it; it needs a nudge from Government.

Mary Robinson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in making that point. In the context of employment law, the existing legislation relates only to people in an employer-employee relationship. As I was going on to say, there is evidence that an office of the whistleblower would incentivise disclosures. People would have a safe space in which to speak, and currently they do not have that across every sector and in every way.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My hon. Friend makes the good point that the existing legislation covers only people who are employed by organisations, but it was evident on Tuesday that sometimes employees do not feel able to bring forward their concerns. In the NHS, patients or their families end up having to raise the concerns, and they are not covered by the legislation.

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which gets to the heart of the matter. Our existing law only looks at whether there is an employer-employee relationship, and when there is a relationship breakdown and the person is forced out of their job or leaves it—whether or not that is because of constructive dismissal—they will end up in an employment tribunal arguing the case for their job and their livelihood. The issue that she raises is not touched on at all. Family members of patients, or those who have come across harm and wrongdoing in a different way, have no cover at all. Across the piece, whistleblowers do not get the protection they need, and I would like that to be changed.

To put into perspective where we are now, in 2020 the International Bar Association measured countries with whistleblowing legislation against a list of 20 best practices. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) knows, the existing legislation was introduced in 1998 by her predecessor, so the provisions have been in our law for some time and were groundbreaking at the time. The UK meets only five of the 20 best practice measures. Meanwhile, the United States, whose Office of the Whistleblower sits in the Securities and Exchange Commission, met 16 of the measures. That office received 12,300 disclosures in 2022, which was nearly double the 2020 figure. Ministers have promised a review of the existing whistleblowing framework, and that is welcome.

James Daly: Will my hon. Friend comment on this matter in respect of how the legislation is not working? Originally, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 did not apply to police officers. However, whistleblowing provisions and protections came in through the Police Reform Act 2002, and they received whistleblowing protection from 1 April 2004. We have legislation in place that states police officers have whistleblowing protection. The situation has actually got worse, and that clearly shows that the legislation needs reforming immediately.

Mary Robinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that; we have seen it across various police forces. We are now further examining how the cultures are working, and that need for reform is there. It shows that the best intentions to bring in reforms do not always lead to the protections that we want people to have.

I welcome the review. However, as part of it, I ask the Minister and the Department to look at where this policy area falls and which Department should take responsibility. We have spoken already today about the NHS, policing, and different sectors and organisations. Although I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is now the Minister responsible, given his extensive experience and his support for whistleblowers and legislative change, I hope that he and the Government will look at the issue in a different way. The existing law has constraints because it relates to only employment and business. Perhaps now is the time to look at the issue more holistically, because it crosses so many Departments.

As I have already set out, the issue cuts across industries and sectors. Importantly, anyone—not just an employee—can be a whistleblower. However, our laws have told us to look at it from only an employer-employee perspective. When it was introduced 25 years ago, the Public Interest Disclosure Act was heralded as world leading, with protections for whistleblowers at employment tribunals. However, as I just said to my hon. Friend, just 4% of employment cases are successful at tribunal. That further brings PIDA's efficacy into question.

We are all familiar with gov.uk; it is where we get all our information. The gov.uk page on whistleblowing says:

"You're a whistleblower if you're a worker and you report certain types of wrongdoing. This will usually be something you've seen at work - though not always.

The wrongdoing you disclose must be in the public interest. This means it must affect others, for example the general public."

By my interpretation, that means the Government consider only a limited part of the population to be whistleblowers.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Minister attended the launch of Whistleblowing Awareness Week on Monday. I am grateful for his comments and support. He has wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge in this area; I like to think that is partly due to his time as co-chair of the APPG on whistleblowing. I was interested to hear his comments on his business experience and the importance of customer complaints. However, if a customer witnesses wrongdoing in a business or organisation, they are not covered by PIDA. As my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash pointed out, a family member of an employee is not covered. Volunteers and contractors are not covered either.

[Mary Robinson]

Despite concerns expressed by some, this is not about stripping back employment rights. It is about extending those rights and protections to the wider population. It is about protecting victims of crime who may have evidence of wrongdoing within the police, protecting lawyers and accountants who have uncovered evidence of fraud, and protecting those associated with economic crime who may wish to inform law enforcement. Whistleblowing is more than an employment issue. It is a business issue, a safety issue and an issue for Government. I question whether its future belongs in employment law at all.

During Whistleblowing Awareness Week, we heard from some of those who have spoken out about their journey to expose the truth. Our discussions highlighted the urgent need for the Government to introduce new legislation that defines whistleblowing and puts in place meaningful measures to protect whistleblowers from retaliation. It is interesting that our existing legislation does not mention the word “whistleblower” at all.

For those in doubt about the urgency for reform, I hope I have made some of the moral arguments. Let us get to finance. Whistleblowers are acknowledged as the single most effective means of addressing fraud and corruption—not accountants, lawyers or anybody else, but whistleblowers. It is estimated that fraud and corruption costs the UK over £190 billion a year. To put that into perspective, that is more than the entire NHS budget. We cannot continue in this way.

The proposals backed by the APPG on whistleblowing and in the Bill that I brought forward last year will improve the rights of workers, give new rights to everyone, save lives and put an end to the costly and wasteful practice of cover up.

Whistleblowing Awareness Week was brought forward and launched to introduce and mobilise public opinion, influence legislators, celebrate those courageous whistleblowers who have already given so much to society and seek to bring about a better world in which ordinary people will no longer have to have extraordinary courage to speak up. It is my hope that the conversations we have had this week will continue to move the dial towards legislative change, and I am grateful to have the time in this debate to be able to raise awareness of Whistleblowing Awareness Week.

1.55 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) for a long time; there are good MPs and there are great MPs, and she is a great MP. I want to amplify the time, effort and courage that she has shown on this particular issue, because she has done some very important work and continues to do it to this day.

I am a member of the Home Affairs and Justice Committees, so I will talk about whistleblowing in that context. It is wonderful to see the Minister in his place. Before he took up his ministerial position, he did a lot of work in this House on economic crime, and he knows the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle. The Casey review has highlighted and amplified the importance of whistleblowers. Baroness Casey appeared before the Home Affairs Committee

yesterday and outlined a whole set of horrific allegations and incidents that have happened in the Metropolitan police over a number of years. It is simply not good enough to say, “Yes, those were horrific. What can we do about that?” In my view, one of the reasons why the system was unable to deal with some of the problems we have seen in police forces throughout the country is that although there are some protections—I read out the Police Reform Act 2002 earlier—they are not good enough to encourage and give people the protection to speak out about the abominable acts they see around them.

In the Metropolitan police, officers were witnessing criminal behaviour, but they did not have the protection to be able to speak out about it. It is quite extraordinary when we think about it. This week—I think this was a recent statement, but this must put it into perspective—Sir Mark Rowley said:

“So I’ve got officers who we determined shouldn’t be police officers and yet I have to keep them. It sounds bizarre—I’m the commissioner, yet I can’t decide who my own workforce is.”

A witness to a criminal act might want to be a whistleblower, but why would they threaten their career progression or risk the breakdown of relationships with work colleagues if they knew there would be no consequences?

The situation is worse than that. In Greater Manchester police, there was a lady named Maggie Oliver, who I think all of us in the room know; my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle has done a lot of work with her. Maggie was involved for 15 years in the investigation of serious sexual offending in the Greater Manchester area. She had to resign from her job for stating—I will just say it as it is—that rapes were being carried out on teenagers in the Rochdale area and the police were refusing to do anything about it. Within the internal procedures and processes of the police force, she could not even have that matter dealt with. This is a matter of fact; this is not made up.

Maggie had to take the brave decision to leave a career that she loved after 15 years to state the obvious and honest facts of what was happening within the police. What has happened? She has been incredibly brave—she has set up the Maggie Oliver Foundation—but Greater Manchester police continued to say, “No, that’s not true”—they covered the whole thing up and made it incredibly difficult.

Both myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle have had various officers from Greater Manchester police come to us stating the most appalling things, but they are concerned that there is no protection because, even though there is some in PIDA and the other legislation, the actual culture in these organisations means that they will be hounded out of their jobs. In 2019, in Greater Manchester police, it was quite obvious to a number of us that the new, £27 million integrated operational policing system computer was falling apart. No police officer publicly criticised that. No police officer was able to go out and say, “This is a disaster.” But they came to various elected representatives and the local paper, the *Manchester Evening News*, to say that, as a result of what was happening, police and public safety was at risk. The chief constable of Greater Manchester police at the time said it was not true, and that everything was fine—but it was true.

Even with fundamental issues of public safety, when people are being brutalised in the most appalling manner, people in our police forces are not confident that they

will have sufficient protections to enable them to protect the public. I cannot find the words to describe how appalling that is. There are things in the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 that are still applicable. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle said that the definition meant that the relevant person had to be an employee. The qualifying disclosures for which someone is covered and given protection are:

“a criminal offence has been committed...a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation...a miscarriage of justice has occurred...the health or safety of any individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered...the environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged”.

That is a very broad description of what is in the public interest.

There are warm words on the statute book, but they do not work. They should apply outside of just employees, but even if we look at them on their own terms, they do not work. The evidence says they do not work. I suspect the Minister agrees with me, and feels that we have to find a different way to deal with such matters. We asked Baroness Casey how long it would be until we could assess the reform needed at the Metropolitan police; she answered that it would be at least two years. Who protects the public in those two years? We have had disasters in the Met for years and years. Whistleblowers are the protection for the public, and they will not come forward because the system does not protect them.

I argue strongly that we are in a very bad situation. I was going to say that we should treasure whistleblowers—I think that is the correct word. I cannot think of a circumstance where a whistleblower would take that brave step if it was not in the public interest and for a public good. We need a different way, and the private Member's Bill put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle offers one. I say bluntly to the Minister that if we do not have those protections, we will have another report from another eminent person about another police force saying that appalling things have been happening, but officers have not had sufficient protection from internal management and procedures to come forward and do what is right. That needs to be changed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I support every single word she said.

2.3 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to participate in this debate during Whistleblowing Awareness Week 2023. Let us hope it is the first of many, but let us also hope that we do not need it for many years to come.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) on securing today's debate, and I thank her for her work in bringing this important issue to the forefront of public debate, culminating in the inaugural Whistleblowing Awareness Week. I was delighted to accept an invitation from her to chair the roundtable earlier this week, where we held a productive discussion about the challenges that whistleblowers face in our NHS.

I will use my time today to highlight the importance of whistleblowing and add my name to the growing list of parliamentarians calling on the Government to introduce fresh legislation to protect those brave enough to expose wrongdoing where it is in the public interest.

It is worth reiterating for the benefit of those watching our proceedings, including my constituents, exactly what defines a whistleblower. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle has already quoted what is on the gov.uk website, but I do not think it does any harm to repeat it and repeat it. It defines a whistleblower as a person who will

“report certain types of wrongdoing. This will usually be something you've seen at work—though not always.

The wrongdoing you disclose must be in the public interest. This means it must affect others, for example the general public.”

It goes on to reassure readers that

“As a whistleblower you're protected by law—you should not be treated unfairly or lose your job because you 'blow the whistle'.

You can raise your concern at any time about an incident that happened in the past, is happening now, or you believe will happen in the near future.”

However, although in principle individuals are protected under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, we know that in practice whistleblowers remain vulnerable to retaliation for their actions, due in part to the current inadequacies of existing legislation.

Over many decades, thanks to the courageous efforts of whistleblowers, serious cases of wrongdoing, including corruption and malpractice, have been brought to the attention of the public. Members may recall the notable case of Katharine Gun, a GCHQ employee who, in 2003, leaked top secret information to *The Observer* newspaper in an attempt to prevent the Iraq war. Although the leaking of this information did not ultimately stop the war, it put an end to the prospects of a second UN resolution authorising the invasion and prompted worldwide condemnation of the actions of the US intelligence community. If Members have not already done so, I greatly encourage them to watch the film “Official Secrets”, which documents Ms Gun's remarkable whistleblowing story.

Many of us will also remember the repeated instances of physical and psychological abuse perpetrated by staff at Winterbourne View. These horrific crimes were only exposed when the BBC's “Panorama” programme took up the investigations after previous allegations made by a senior nurse at the hospital were dismissed by the Care Quality Commission. The subsequent serious case review into Winterbourne View revealed hundreds of previous incidents at the hospital and warnings that were missed. This whistleblowing not only led to the criminal conviction of 11 individuals, six of whom were subsequently jailed, but to the closure of the hospital and—importantly—it put an end to the shocking abuse at that site of some of the most vulnerable people in society. In both the cases that I have cited so far, the whistleblowers believed that they had a moral duty to expose wrongdoing in the institutions that they worked in and their stories serve to highlight how whistleblowing can bring about fundamental and positive change.

It was made evident at an NHS roundtable earlier this week, which I had the honour of chairing, that although whistleblowers are protected by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, many individual whistleblowers commonly face an uphill battle to be heard in the first place, and they can then encounter discrimination from colleagues and employers once allegations are made. We heard a very moving story from a nurse about the impact that her actions had had. She not only lost her job but her whole family were impacted. Indeed, the

[Maggie Throup]

overall impact was so severe that she seriously considered taking her own life. We cannot let that happen to anybody who is trying to make things better for other people.

Professor Emmanouil Nikolousis was previously a clinical director at University Hospitals Birmingham, where he led a review into potential malpractice. At the roundtable, he detailed how he was bullied out of his post by senior NHS managers in 2020. This was because the findings of his report included details of how repeated breakdowns in communication between doctors at the trust had led to some patients dying without receiving appropriate care. Professor Nikolousis is now calling for a full inquiry into the trust, with his own story demonstrating why more needs to be done to protect whistleblowers.

However, the positive news is that increasingly organisations such as the NHS are moving to implement policies that help and support their employees to speak out, although I know that more still needs to be done. The freedom to speak up policy aims to ensure that everyone working within the NHS feels sufficiently safe and confident to speak up, as well as encouraging leaders within the organisation to take the opportunity to learn from those who speak up and improve matters.

These organic policies, such as the freedom to speak up, should, in combination with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, give employees confidence that they will be treated fairly and fully supported when they raise concerns about malpractice. It has been quite evident today and throughout the week that the measures we have are not working, and we need to go further. When it comes to legislative and regulatory protections for whistleblowers, the UK currently lags far behind many other countries, including those in the EU, in imposing new and severe penalties on companies that either obstruct whistleblowers or fail to keep their identity confidential, as we have already heard. It is clear, not least from the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle and by Baroness Kramer, that both Houses of Parliament want to do more and that there is an appetite to protect whistleblowers.

I look forward to the Minister's comments at the end of the debate, and I urge the Government to introduce the necessary legislation to protect whistleblowers further and ensure that the types of serious cases that we have heard about today and throughout the week continue to be exposed in the public interest.

2.11 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. Like others, I want to start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) for introducing the debate. She is nothing if not tenacious and persistent, and she should be sincerely applauded for that.

I want to start with a very short history lesson. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle alluded to, my predecessor was the late Richard Shepherd, the former Member of Parliament for Aldridge-Brownhills. Sir Richard had a record of defending whistleblowers and fighting for transparency, as well as of campaigning on many other things. Back in 1997, believe it or not, he was

drawn in the private Member's Bill ballot, and he introduced the Public Interest Disclosure Bill. With cross-party support, it was enacted in 1998, and is now referred to as PIDA. That was almost 25 years ago. We could stand here and argue that Sir Richard's Act of Parliament is one of the very few pieces of legislation to have stood the test of time with very little change. However, I think most present, if not all, would argue differently. I am hoping that the Minister is on board, given his knowledge and expertise in this field of policy from before he became a Minister.

As we have heard, 2023 will mark the first Whistleblowing Awareness Week in the UK. This week, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle having secured the debate, we have an opportunity to raise awareness and debate this really important issue, and to highlight some of the many whistleblowing cases. Many cases make it into the public domain—we have heard this week from the Casey review—but many others do not. Important acts of whistleblowing help to keep us all safe.

Legislative change is needed now more than ever before. As I have said, we often think of the high profile cases that make the newspapers and are turned into fascinating films and documentaries, yet the truth is that, 25 years since the Act was passed, too many people are still not protected—from job applicants to volunteers, to name just a couple of groups. Too many who speak out suffer victimisation. Those who do not probably fear it.

As we have heard, there is clearly an appetite in Parliament to do something and to take action. In April last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle introduced her ten-minute rule Bill on whistleblowing; alas, it ran out of time, as sadly often happens with ten-minute rule Bills and private Member's Bills, as I know only too well. In June 2022, a private Member's Bill was introduced in the other place called the Protection for Whistleblowing Bill. It had its Second Reading in December last year, and I think we all hope that it will continue to make good progress.

My hon. Friend has long campaigned for change and for protection for whistleblowers. She has articulated today, through her words and through the examples that she has shared with us, how much knowledge she has on this particular topic, and how much evidence and appetite there is for that change. It is time to make it easier for concerned employees, contractors and stakeholders to raise a concern. It is time to encourage employees to speak up by offering them confidentiality and options for reporting. It is also time to set minimum standards for whistleblowing policies.

It takes a very brave person—a hugely courageous person—to be a whistleblower. Often it takes just one, and others will follow. That first person has to be incredibly brave to report certain types of wrongdoing or to reveal information about activity within an organisation that is deemed illegal. When that is done properly, when the right protections are in place, whistleblowing can be positive and can lead to the much-needed change, betterment and improvement from which so many will benefit.

It is time to make whistleblowing a tool for business improvement and safeguarding, and to step back from the “who” and focus much more on the “what”. I support my hon. Friend seeks legislative change—changes to the framework, and changes that start to drive the buy-in of organisations. Those organisations need to be nudged to take up the responsibility, and to be responsible

for driving forward buy-in from their employees by encouraging and developing what I would call a healthy culture, which means that when a person needs to speak up it is possible to do so, that they are listened to and that what they say is acted on.

Equally, there must be protections for those organisations against vexatious whistleblowing. I acknowledge that there is a slight balance and nuance that must be addressed, too. None the less, whistleblowing can have a real value when it is viewed as good for business and good for organisations. The 2019 report of the all-party group for whistleblowing concluded that whistleblowing

“can help prevent harm to the fundamental values of society, including individual rights and liberties, justice, health, economic prosperity and stability”.

The Government have committed to review the whistleblowing framework. May I gently urge the Minister to get on with it, please? In doing so, perhaps he could also consider the point that my hon. Friends have raised about the Government Department in which this should sit. Is the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy the best place for it? Perhaps, given that it is such an overarching issue, it would be better placed in the Cabinet Office.

Whistleblowing must be seen through the prism of keeping us all safe. It is good for business, good for organisations and good for society, but it also needs to work for the individual, so we must protect whistleblowers from being victimised. We should seek to work together with the Minister to deliver that cultural change. That will then start to make the difference that I know my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle and so many others are seeking to achieve.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I call the SNP spokesperson, Martin Docherty-Hughes.

2.18 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. Let me first thank the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) for gaining this debate today and also thank her and the secretariat of the all-party group for whistleblowing for their hard work.

Before I proceed with my speech, I wish to touch on one thing that the hon. Member mentioned, which is the notion of what an employee is. I hope the Minister and the Government will take that on board. For example, before I came to this House in 2015, I had worked as an employee in the voluntary sector in my own constituency and community of West Dunbartonshire for more than a decade. I am keenly aware of—I do not want to say “work” here—the voluntary activity that delivers public services, and also private business, if someone is seeking to gain experience, in all of our communities. I hope the Minister hears what the hon. Lady and the all-party group are saying about that issue, because volunteers can be some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They include not just those who have retired and want to do something active in later life, or those gaining additional experience, for example in the health service—not just in trusts but on boards in Scotland—but some of the most vulnerable people in society. Having a broader definition, such as “an individual service provider”, might assist the Government.

The SNP is clear that whistleblowing is crucial to a free and open democratic society. It is an integral part of exposing crime, corruption and cover-ups, and a pillar supporting transparency. A democratic and just society, I am sure all Members agree, has a duty to create a culture in which speaking up is valued and in which people who try to silence whistleblowers or suppress evidence of wrongdoing face the full force of the law.

I congratulate those who have brought about Whistleblowing Awareness Week, which is an opportunity to celebrate people who speak out on workplace issues, call out corruption and expose criminal actions. It is only right that we recognise that whistleblowers are an important check on power structures in Government—and, indeed, in our own political parties, the media, business and other areas. We saw that during the pandemic; the consequences played out in Parliament this week. The issues relating to the Met are not just for it to think about, but for wider society.

As a tech geek, I am mindful of the investigative journalists who revealed the Cambridge Analytica story—remember them? Whistleblowers such as Chris Wylie and Brittany Kaiser divulged the global extent of data manipulation on digital platforms, and shifted conversations about data rights and political malpractice to the top of the public and political agenda. Like many whistleblowers, such individuals are vulnerable to retaliation for their actions. Although there are laws in place to protect them, sometimes those laws are not adequate or effective in their application.

Such individuals always seem to rise to the challenge and face the threats made against them. A Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen, revealed that hateful political ads are five times cheaper for customers—it has been referred to as subsidising hate. She did that with 22,000 pages secretly copied from company documents that proved her claims. She provided evidence here in Westminster and in the United States Congress. She said:

“I think the part that informed my journey was: You have to accept when you whistle-blow like this that you could lose everything. You could lose your money, you could lose your freedom, you could alienate everyone who cares about you. There’s all these things that could happen to you. Once you overcome your fear of death, anything is possible. I think it gave me the freedom to say: Do I want to follow my conscience?”

I have to say, I am glad Frances did.

The National Crime Agency’s annual fraud indicator estimates fraud losses to the UK at about £190 billion every year. The private sector is hit the hardest, losing about £140 billion. The public sector loses more than £40 billion, and individual civilians lose about £7 billion.

The SNP believes that whistleblowing laws ought to be reformed, as the hon. Member for Cheadle said, to better protect whistleblowers calling out bad actors. With Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, the UK became the first EU country, as it was then, to introduce new whistleblowing legislation. It was heralded as a watershed moment, and expectations were high, given that whistleblowing was now seen as legitimate, but we know that employers may be better protected now by placing a gagging clause on workers—a clause in an employment contract or a compromise agreement that purports to prohibit a worker from disclosing information about their current or former workplace. A compromise agreement is a contract concluded at the end of an employment relationship that seeks to prevent further disputes. Typically, it is accompanied by a payment to a worker.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

According to the very good work of the all-party group for whistleblowing:

“Whistleblowers in general remain the subject of suspicion and scepticism and while organisations and official bodies sing the merits of whistleblowing and parade their policies and procedures, the lived experience of whistleblowers remains poor. For those who embark upon a legal remedy the chance of success is less than 10%, the personal cost in financial terms is beyond the means of most people and the physical and mental cost untold.”

There is therefore, as the all-party group says, an

“urgent need to completely rethink UK whistleblowing law and make it fit for the 21st century.”

The all-party group argues for a whistleblowing Bill, which the SNP would support. As the hon. Member for Cheadle has already said, the Bill would define whistleblowers and whistleblowing in law. It would properly and clearly set out the duties of relevant persons and establish an office of the whistleblower with the responsibility to uphold the rights of whistleblowers, but also to set, monitor and enforce the new standards. The Bill proposes a multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach to emphasise the value of whistleblowers and the crucial role they play in a healthy society. I call on the Government to heed the calls of not only the all-party parliamentary group, but the hon. Member for Cheadle.

I will end on the issue of volunteers. If Government Ministers require briefings, for example from the national body of volunteering in Scotland, Volunteer Scotland, I am sure it would help. There will be many people across all these islands who would look to extend whistleblowing legislation to cover those who deliver public service as well as sometimes giving up their free time to deliver private wealth.

2.26 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms McDonagh, and to speak on this important issue during the first Whistleblowing Awareness Week, which was launched in Parliament on Monday. I am pleased to add my voice to calls for organisations to change and for people to have the courage to come forward. There should be no fear or cover-up in organisations, and we need to look at how we change the law to enable and support that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) on securing the debate. There is no greater champion in Parliament for the protection of whistleblowers. We now also have colleagues in the Lords, whom we have mentioned today, who are taking forward the call for stronger legislation. I support the hon. Lady's argument that UK standards should also be global standards. I thank WhistleblowersUK for its relentless advocacy in this space. I encourage everyone to be involved as much as possible in any remaining programmes and activity this week. I am sure that Whistleblowing Awareness Week will be an annual event; it is vital to keep a focus on the issue and keep Parliament's mind focused on not just legislation, but perhaps how well that new legislation could be working. It was a pleasure to speak alongside WhistleblowersUK chief executive Georgina Halford-Hall at the start of the week, with the Minister also present at the event.

Most importantly, as I am sure the whole House and all who are present will agree, those in most need of our thanks this week are the whistleblowers themselves, for

the extraordinary risks they take and the great sacrifices they make to uphold justice, transparency and accountability, in this country and internationally. It is clear from the contributions today that that sentiment is felt across the House.

The hon. Member for Cheadle laid out some of the new insights that were shared at roundtables this week and spoke about the misuse of non-disclosure agreements. There were also important contributions from the hon. Members for Bury North (James Daly) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who has her very own constituency connection to the passing of PIDA 25 years ago. The right hon. Lady called for clarity and, perhaps, more urgency on the Government's next steps. I acknowledge and support the arguments made by colleagues and the connection with the harrowing Casey report that is out this week and is very much a part of all our lives, particularly those of us who are London Members of Parliament. I also thank the hon. Member for Erewash for chairing roundtables at some of the events this week. SNP colleagues have also been supportive, not just today but during the ongoing debates on the issue.

The importance of whistleblowing in upholding transparency in opaque institutions and exposing law-breaking cannot be underestimated, whether that is regarding sexual abuse scandals, Grenfell, economic and financial crime, financial institutions, the police, Government Departments, sporting organisations, religious institutions or large multinational corporations—the list goes on. In every single one, at some point, whistleblowers have been responsible, sometimes solely, for drawing attention to wrongdoing and for bringing justice.

I reiterate the comments of the hon. Member for Cheadle on economic crime, an area in which I worked closely with the Minister, on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill. The National Crime Agency estimates that fraud costs the UK economy £190 billion each year, including £40 billion to the public sector. Between 43% and 47% of serious economic crimes are exposed by whistleblowers. The numbers show the huge scale of the issue, the huge role that whistleblowers play in exposing economic crime, and the impact they could have on our economy, if they were granted more protection under legislation.

One example is the Danske Bank money laundering scheme, where criminals took advantage of UK limited liability partnerships. It was a whistleblower that exposed the \$230 billion economic crime operation, halting a stream of Russian money laundering.

That is why better protection of whistleblowers is so important—because, in so many cases, they are the first line of defence. They deserve greater legal protections than they currently receive. Multiple Ministers have promised us that change is coming, but that is not a message currently commanding the greatest of confidence. The Minister is likely to say that he is reviewing the whistleblowing framework and moving forward as soon as possible. That is an area on which we have common ground.

James Daly: The hon. Member is making some valid points. As parliamentarians, we could come up with new legislation that could give new protections. The problem is that if certain organisations have toxic cultures, no matter what the legal protections are, people are

intimidated and will not come forward. That is where the issue is, no matter the legislation. The Met is one example, but there are others. I wonder what she feels we can do on institutionalised attitudes.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member raises a significant point, which I alluded to in my comments on the speech by the hon. Member for Cheadle. This issue needs serious leadership, commitment and accountability for change. The debates we have had in Parliament on the Casey report are some examples. Transparency and accountability at the very top really do matter.

When the Government bring forward measures, this is an area on which we will have common ground. The Minister knows we will support the Government on those measures, but I hope he will also understand that we want to see measures brought forward more quickly than is apparent at the moment—perhaps he will speak to that that in his remarks—because whistleblowers are being let down by inaction.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, which was referred to in the debate, was initially celebrated as groundbreaking. Now, only 4% of people who bring claims under its provisions succeed. There are arguments that it effectively discourages whistleblowing, and there are questions now about its scope. Independent data shows an overall decline in whistleblower reports across the public and private sectors, and reports of harassment against those threatening to whistleblow are increasing. That is utterly unacceptable.

Last year the International Bar Association, as has been mentioned, conducted the first review of its kind to assess countries with whistleblower legislation against compliance with international best practice. The UK ranked only 12th out of 16 countries. As the APPG for whistleblowing, chaired by the hon. Member for Cheadle, highlights in its recent report,

“Whistleblowers in general remain the subject of suspicion and scepticism and while organisations and official bodies sing the merits of whistleblowing and parade policies and procedures the lived experience of whistleblowers remains poor.”

It is clear that much more needs to be done if we are to adequately protect whistleblowers and ensure greater transparency in our public and private institutions. That is why during the passage of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill through the Commons, both in Committee and on Report, the Labour party supported the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Cheadle, which would have established an office of the whistleblower. That happens in the United States, so why not here?

The office would protect whistleblowers from detriment, ensure that disclosures by whistleblowers are investigated, and escalate information and evidence of wrongdoing outside of its remit to another appropriate authority. The objectives of the office would be to encourage and support people to make whistleblowing reports, to provide an independent, confidential and safe environment for making and receiving whistleblowing information, to provide information and advice on whistleblowing, and to act on evidence of detriment. As the hon. Member for Cheadle raised on Report, there is evidence that an office of whistleblowers incentivises and increases disclosures.

In 2020 the International Bar Association tested countries with whistleblowing legislation against a list of 20 best practices. The UK met just five. Meanwhile, the United

States, which has an Office of the Whistleblower, met 16, and that office received 12,300 disclosures in 2022, nearly double the number of 2020.

The Labour Front Bench will join cross-party calls in Parliament to increase protections for whistleblowers at a time when it could not be needed more. I hope the Government will say more today about the steps that they will take. I note that during the passage of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill through the Commons the Security Minister said he agreed with the need for an office of the whistleblower. His exact words were:

“what the country needs is an office for whistleblowers, and what we need to do is ensure that we have the updates to the legislation that she”—

the hon. Member for Cheadle—

“so correctly highlighted.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 1094.]

So I ask the Minister: what progress have the Government made in carrying out that latest commitment?

I seek assurances from the Minister that action is on its way—not just a commitment to having a review, but genuine action. I look forward to his response and hope that the Government will get a grip of what is an important issue and make sure that there is support for whistleblowers and for the sacrifices that they make every day to uphold justice and transparency.

2.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) for all the work that she does on the all-party group. As she rightly points out, I was formerly the co-chair with her on that group. We can sometimes move from a Back-Bench position where we speak about an issue that we feel strongly about, and then we can be put in a ministerial position that covers that brief, but I can reassure Members that I am as ambitious as ever to make sure we get the right reforms for whistleblowing.

My hon. Friend had a reception, which I was pleased to attend. She has had a number of events this week, and I pay tribute to her for her work in drawing attention to the importance of whistleblowers for our society. Whistleblowers are clearly the eyes and ears of our organisations, in terms of potential wrongdoing. As my hon. Friend knows, I have had a number of experiences with constituents. Ian Foxley blew the whistle on GPT Special Project Management, and did an incredible job. Paul Moore blew the whistle at HBOS prior to its financial distress and collapse. Sally Masterton was the whistleblower of the HBOS Reading scandal, which took five years to reach court, where she was vindicated for her statements.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) referenced Danske Bank, and the £234 billion of money laundering. She is right to talk about some of the UK corporate vehicles used for that. We are working together on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to tighten up the opportunities people have to use those vehicles. One of the biggest scandals in that case was Danske Bank allowing that to happen on its watch. Howard Wilkinson was the whistleblower; the £234 billion of Russian money washing through Danske Bank in Estonia resulted in a \$2 billion fine from the US authorities.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

According to the statistics, 43% of economic crimes are highlighted by whistleblowers, but in my experience, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle stated, it is much higher than that. Every case of economic crime I have dealt with has come from a whistleblower, and I pay tribute to them. It is not just financial crime; my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) highlighted issues with the Met police, which might have been brought to light much sooner if people had felt more confident about the whistleblowing framework. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) talked about Winterbourne View; that also might have come to light much sooner, with people being brought to justice much sooner, if people had more confidence.

It is right that we seek to more effectively protect and compensate whistleblowers for doing the right thing. It is excellent that we have so many top-quality parliamentarians in this debate who will throw their weight behind the campaign for change. I am keen to do so too.

Our whistleblowing framework was introduced through the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. It was intended to build openness and trust in workplaces by ensuring that workers can hold their employers to account, and are then treated fairly. It provides a route for workers to make disclosures of wrongdoing, including criminal offences, the endangerment of health and safety, causing damage to the environment, a miscarriage of justice, or a breach of any legal obligation. Disclosures usually need to be made to the employer, a lawyer or a prescribed person. Workers who believe they have been dismissed or otherwise detrimentally treated for making a protected disclosure can make a claim to an employment tribunal, which can award unlimited compensation.

Workers are often the first people to witness any type of wrongdoing within an organisation. Information that workers may uncover could prevent wrongdoing that may damage an organisation's reputation or performance, and, in extreme circumstances, even save people from harm or death. In relation to whistleblowing protections, the standard employment law definition of a worker has been extended, and includes a wide range of employment relationships, such as agency workers; individuals under-taking work experience; self-employed doctors, dentists and pharmacists in the NHS; job applicants in the health sector; police officers; and student nurses and student midwives.

I fully understand that there are people who are not protected by the current legislation. Indeed, Ian Foxley was not covered by the legislation, and suffered hundreds of thousands of pounds of detriment for blowing the whistle. He spent 11 years without any employment, and he was a well-paid contractor prior to that time.

James Daly: What does the Minister mean by protected?

Kevin Hollinrake: Protected from detriment. In Ian Foxley's case, he feared for his life. It could be detriment in terms of loss of employment. There are a number of different detriments. Both protection and compensation should be fairly made.

James Daly: As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) said, there is a 4% success rate at employment tribunal. Those protections do not seem to be translating into ones that are enforceable in an employment tribunal, which is the problem.

Kevin Hollinrake: I will come on to what we are trying to do to make the legislation more effective. Do I think the legislation is where it needs to be today? No, I do not. That is the case for the changes we need to make. We need to look at all the different evidential points to ensure we move to the right place. Ian Foxley was a contractor, which is why he did not have the opportunity to get compensation in his case.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) made a good point about volunteers. They may also be the eyes and ears we need. He made the alarming point that people who blow the whistle could lose everything, which all of us should take into account. People who clearly do not feel they will be properly protected or properly compensated should feel more assured that they will.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) pointed to the fact that the legislation was implemented 25 years ago by one of her predecessors. To give some reassurance, since the introduction of that legislation, the Government have continued to strengthen some of its provisions using non-legislative and legislative measures. We have produced guidance for whistleblowers and prescribed persons, as well as guidance and a code of practice for employers. We have produced guidance on how whistleblowers can make disclosures.

In 2017, we introduced a new requirement for most prescribed persons to produce an annual report on whistleblowing disclosures made to them. That duty is a direct response to concerns about the lack of transparency surrounding how disclosures were being handled. Most prescribed persons are now required to report on the number of disclosures, state whether they decided to take further action and give a summary of any action taken. We have also expanded the list of prescribed persons—the individuals and bodies to whom a worker can blow the whistle. In December 2022, I took forward some legislation to add six new bodies and all Members of the Scottish Parliament to the prescribed persons order. We continue to welcome proposals for appropriate additions to that order.

Wendy Morton: I appreciate that there have been updates to the original 1998 Act, and I recognise that work needs to continue. I want to push the Minister on the review. Will he give us any timescale or any indication of when we will see the Government undertake further work in the light of some of the thoughts, ideas and recommendations from the APPG?

Kevin Hollinrake: I was just coming on to that. As a former Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend will be familiar with a word we often hear in this place: soon. I will say very, very soon. It is fair to say that we talking about days, not months. We are closer to days than months; that is where I would say we are.

Many have spoken passionately today, and on previous occasions, about the experiences of whistleblowers, and raised concerns about the whistleblowing framework.

As I said, the Government have committed to reviewing the framework. It is clearly a major priority of mine, and it has been since I joined the Department. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made the important point that while we must ensure we protect the right people, we do not want to allow for vexatious whistleblowers because that could have a detrimental impact on businesses and other organisations. It is important that we protect those who should be protected.

Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said, we must protect the people who would have blown the whistle had they had confidence in the framework. That is one of the big problems here. People are not coming forward because of their concerns and because of what has happened to other whistleblowers. That includes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle mentioned, Jonathan Taylor, who blew the whistle in the oil scandal and was pretty much under house arrest for a year in Croatia. That was disgraceful treatment.

As I said, making progress on the review has been a priority of mine from day one. There will be an announcement on that very, very soon. That is what we are expecting. We are keen to engage with parliamentarians from across the House, both here and in the other place. Once that review is announced, I am keen to engage particularly with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle so she can make her points about the right way forward in terms of the provisions we need to make and future changes to legislation.

My hon. Friend talked about the policyholder for this particular brief and whether it should be the Department for Business and Trade or the Cabinet Office, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills suggested. I am very keen to keep it under my auspices, because, as Members have said in the debate today, I have a long-standing interest in this particular area. I am very keen and ambitious for it, so I am keen to keep hold of it. However, it is right to point out that it is the legislation around whistleblowing and employment that is held with me. Of course, the particular issues around Departments—the whistleblowing requirements—are held by each individual Department. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash will confirm, whistleblowing in the NHS is very much a matter for the Department for Health and Social Care. That is the right situation regarding this particular policy.

Wendy Morton: From my experience as a Minister, I know how whistleblowing policy does cut into other Departments. I understand the Minister's passion and willingness to drive this policy forward, but looking to the future, in whatever work he is doing can he really ensure that it embraces all of Government? That is why I was pointing towards the Cabinet Office.

Kevin Hollinrake: I quite understand my right hon. Friend's point and why she made it. My view, both as a Back Bencher and as a Minister, is that we need to work more on a cross-Government basis than perhaps we do now to make sure that these kinds of measure are properly implemented across Government.

A number of Members, including the spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire, talked about NDAs. As he will know, being a member of the legal fraternity—

Martin Docherty-Hughes indicated dissent.

Kevin Hollinrake: No? I thought the hon. Gentleman was.

In law, NDAs cannot be used to prevent a worker from blowing the whistle, so there are some protections in law in that respect. I believe the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston, also brought out that point.

Mary Robinson: On NDAs being used to prevent a worker from blowing the whistle, the Minister is quite right to make that point, but of course another point to consider is when a person blows the whistle, an employment dispute might arise that could be the subject of a case that goes to law, or lead to that person being dismissed from their job. At that point, the person might accept an NDA, so the harm that was being reported and brought to light in the first place is thereby effectively covered up.

Kevin Hollinrake: That brings me to my next point. My hon. Friend makes a very good point, but the employment tribunal is there to settle compensation. It is the regulators in the various sectors that are there to look at the problem, the detriment, and to consider the whistleblowing concerns and act on them. That cannot be restricted by an NDA in that kind of compensation settlement, I think.

What I regard as the key point in my hon. Friend's contribution today is the proposal for an office of the whistleblower. I quite understand that the intent is to provide one central place for whistleblowing and to make sure that we have best practice across the piece. Such an office would provide consistency in standards for regulatory investigations triggered by whistleblowing information. I am also interested in the issues that dealing with whistleblowing disclosures might raise for the prescribed persons, and vice versa.

I know there are concerns, not just in Government but in wider circles, about how such an office would interact with the role of regulators, who are experts, of course. It is important that we look at the arguments for and against the proposed office, and I am keen to look at international examples. My hon. Friend referred to the USA. The numbers of disclosures there are interesting. According to my figures, there were 50,000 protected disclosures in the UK in 2020-21. I think my hon. Friend said that 20,000 were dealt with by the Office of the Whistleblower in the US, which is obviously a much bigger country in terms of population and potential whistleblowing. I am interested in the gap.

One point to make is that a UK office of the whistleblower would of course need extensive resources to be able to handle or to oversee 50,000 protected disclosures, and significant expertise to ensure that it fully understood the nature of the problem and was able to work alongside the regulators, which I think is what my hon. Friend envisages, rather than replace the regulators in terms of their functions. Clearly, regulators themselves, be it the FCA or the regulators in the NHS, would have a responsibility to ensure that the issues were addressed properly and whistleblowing guidelines and processes were followed. It is a question of understanding the interaction between the two and what resources would be needed to fully and properly fund an office of the whistleblower.

[*Kevin Hollinrake*]

All these matters need to be taken into account in deciding how to proceed. The review, as I have said, is something that we want to bring forward very quickly, and we want hon. Members on both sides of the House to be able to input into it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the Minister assure hon. Members that in the review he will take cognisance of the question about what an employee delivering a service is? The millions of volunteers across these islands need reassurance. They need to be protected and given the ability to be a whistleblower within the system.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point, which I think was referred to earlier. Some of the whistleblowers I have dealt with were outside the current legislation because of their employment status, so I think that it is a very fair point and it is one that we are very keen to explore through the review.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle again for initiating this very important debate. We are in complete agreement: there should be no doubt that to blow the whistle is an act of real value to both business and society at large. Government, including my Department, will continue to examine and make reforms to the whistleblowing regime, and we will be setting out details of the review of the whistleblowing framework very soon.

2.56 pm

Mary Robinson: It has been a pleasure to be here today. I thank everybody for taking part and joining me today during Whistleblowing Awareness Week. It was a particular pleasure to me when, at the start of the week, I was joined by my hon. Friend the Minister and by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), at the launch and we had unanimity. It is a rare thing in this place to have everybody singing from the same hymn sheet, political though it may be. I hope that that will lead us to some success.

I am reassured by the Minister's words regarding the review. It is probably the first time that I have heard "very, very soon", rather than "soon" or "shortly".

[HON. MEMBERS: "Days!"] Exactly—we got it down to "days". I was going to press for the hours as well, but I will not. The important thing is that this is moving forward.

I thank everybody who has taken part in today's debate. There have been so many powerful interventions and contributions. From the discussions about the Met police force and the GMP issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), we know that this is not just about business—about that one sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who chaired the roundtable this week, talked about the issues in the NHS, and we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), whose predecessor brought forward the legislation that is at the heart of our discussion today and the changes that we want to make.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), rightly took on the key aspect, which is that this is not just about employees; it needs to spread to other people. He gave us pause for thought when he referred to the whistleblower who said, "Be prepared to lose everything." That is what we are trying to fight against. I hope we can take forward the legislation in a robust way, so that during every Whistleblowing Awareness Week we have in the future, as I hope we will, we will be talking positively about the work we have done and the changes that have been made in response to people in organisations who wanted to make those changes.

It cannot be right that a person goes to work every day in fear of saying the right thing. It cannot be right that people's lives are put at risk by organisations where the culture of fear is so inherent that people within them cannot speak out. It cannot be right that people risk losing their job, their livelihood and sometimes their home, their family and their relationships because they do the right thing. I would like to think that we will all be encouraging the Government to do the right thing for whistleblowers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Whistleblowing Awareness Week.

Support for Women in Poverty

[VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of support for women in poverty.

First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place. We are indebted to that Committee for all that it does. It is these debates that enable us as MPs to bring issues to the House for consideration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) was meant to lead this debate, but unfortunately she had to go home for a pressing engagement. As we applied for the debate together, we decided that I should lead the debate on her behalf.

People in every constituency can associate with this issue and fully understand the difficulties and intricacies involved. When my sister Joy decried the lack of help around the house from her brothers, including me, my mother would often say that a woman's lot in life is what it is. My mother accepted the fact that she worked her fingers to the bone in the shop in Ballywalter we had from the '60s through to the '80s, and ran her home. What is more, she revelled in that role. My mother today is a very, very fresh 91-year-old who still tells her biggest son what to do and when to do it. She also gives me her clinical opinion on everything that happens in this place, because she is really, really with it when it comes to what is happening. She is a very capable lady who has thrived on hard work all of her days.

As time has progressed, the expectations placed upon people's shoulders have escalated beyond bearing. I wish to outline the issues faced by all women. I will speak from the honest perspective of a man, while also reflecting the opinions and views of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann. It should not be that a woman has to accept a substandard quality of life in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as so many do, and changes must be implemented now.

Let me talk about what we are doing in Ards, North Down and Strangford. The Ards community rural network has recently opened a women and family hub at 55 Francis Street, just up the road from my own office. I was really pleased to see it, because it focuses attention on the issues of women, children and families in my constituency. The Ards network has also done a lot of research into the prevalence of poverty in everyday life across Ards and North Down.

The network has collected some lived experiences, which include those of people who live alone and lone parents. Let me give Members an example that I was given the other day in preparation for this debate. A lady called in to see us; she was contemplating whether it was better to give up her job as a classroom assistant because she would be £700 better off if she did so. That is the reality for a woman living in poverty in the United Kingdom, in my constituency of Newtonards.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Nine out of 10 single parents are women. The median gross weekly pay for male single parents is £340, but for women it is £194.40. It cannot be denied that a key factor is gender, as women in general are more likely

to be paid less or have to work part time. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Government are not looking at the big picture of why women are more likely to live in persistent poverty? A variety of factors influences their income.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and the statistics from Northern Ireland reflect that. They indicate that what she said is factual and regularly happens to a lot of people.

In Newtownards, we have been working with the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Assembly on a women's development programme. The things that we are doing in my constituency are positive and proactive, and will hopefully lead to the progress that we need.

It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in her place; we look forward to her response. The two shadow spokespeople will, as always, contribute in a very positive fashion and help us to get results from the Minister. I applied for this debate not because I was reminiscing about my childhood with my mum, who was a very, very strong character, but because my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann drew my attention to the issue. We hope it will grasp the attention of Members who can drive for change.

Let me outline some of the facts, which reflect individually and corporately the issues that women in the UK face. Among those who die at working age, 28% of women spend their last year of life below the poverty line compared with 26% of men. Of those who die at pension age, 14% of women spend their last year of life in poverty, compared with 11% of men. That shows another inequality between men and women: women have the greater pain in their last days.

For women in the last year of their life the risk of being in poverty rises by a third compared with women in the general population. Working-age women are three times as likely to be in part-time employment as men. That is a fact of life; I experience it every day in my office and in my advice centre in Strangford. Women are also disproportionately represented in low-paid jobs. More than a quarter of women in work earn less than the real living wage, compared with just 16% of men. As a result, if they lose their job or give up their work, nearly two thirds of working-age women have savings that would last a month or less, and a third have savings that would last less than a week. Women unfortunately do not that much to fall back on. They make very good use of the money that they have, but they do not have that wee bit extra—that wee bit of cream to get them through the harder times. That increases the poverty risk among working-age women in their last years of life.

I will pause for a second to give a Northern Ireland perspective. I always give a Northern Ireland perspective in debates because it helps to formulate opinion, and helps the Minister and shadow Ministers to add their contribution. The unemployment rate for males in Northern Ireland has been consistently higher than for females over the past 10 years. Although the number of employees in Northern Ireland was very evenly spread between males and females, the number of self-employed males was more than double the number of self-employed females, and males were more likely to work full time

[Jim Shannon]

than females. Furthermore, approximately 60% of employed women with dependent children work full time, compared with 95% of males with dependent children.

The unemployment rate for males in Northern Ireland has been consistently higher than for females over the past 10 years, but the gap is narrowing. By 2019, 44% of unemployed people were female and 56% were male. It is almost like-for-like; that shows the trend. Over the past 10 years, there have been consistently more economically inactive women than men. In 2019, just under a third of working-age women were economically inactive, compared with just under a quarter of men.

The most common reason for inactivity among women was family and home commitments. That might be society, but, to be honest, from my point of view, when my wife and I got married, we always wanted children, so we had three children in the first five years of our married life and my decision, and Sandra's decision, was to be with the children. She was a mother who looked after the home and the children, and she did it very well, whereas most of the time I was away from the house. That is probably a conducive factor in a good married life—we spent enough time apart to be able to spend the rest of the time together and not fall out.

The most common reason for inactivity for men was sickness or disability. Some 76% of women with dependent children were economically active compared with 92% of men. The lowest rates for women were those with young dependent children, of pre-school age. That reflects the experience in my society and constituency today. Women are more likely to have dependent children and childcare costs than men. I welcome the Government's action in the Budget on childcare costs. It is really important that childcare support is increased and women are enabled to gain more active employment, right across the United Kingdom.

Marie Curie research has also shown that, UK-wide, working-age people with dependent children are more likely to experience poverty in their last years of life. Among pensioners, women have lower individual retirement incomes than men, reflecting lower average employment over their working lives and lower lifetime earnings than men, and a higher likelihood of having taken time out of the labour market or working part time to raise children. It is a fact of life, and it is again why the issue of women in poverty in the UK is so important.

Retired women are likely to be living closer to the poverty line than men are. This simply feels wrong. I ask the Minister what we are doing to help elderly women who are nearing the last years of their life and who are feeling the financial pressure. They are in the poverty bracket, and they may possibly have disabilities as well. Women aged over 70 in the UK are more than twice as likely as men to live alone, reflecting the average life expectancy of a lady. Living alone is associated with a higher risk of poverty among both the working-age and pension-age population. Some 29% of single pensioners experience poverty in the last years of life, compared with just 21% of pensioners living as a couple. These are the facts according to Marie Curie's research, which is detailed and well evidenced.

The higher risk of poverty at the end of life for women of both working age and pension age is representative of the inequalities that have built up throughout their lives.

These lifelong inequalities mean women are less well placed, on average, than men to bear the additional costs brought on by terminal illness. Many people of that age group who come to me have disabilities. I always point people to the benefits system—attendance allowance, pension credit and so on. We have a very good working relationship with the food bank in our area as well. Those are areas where we are able to help immediately and try to give assistance.

Inequalities persist and are magnified, with retired women's risk of poverty at the end of life increasing at a higher rate than that of men. Marie Curie's research also found that women and people from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely to experience poverty at the end of life than men or people from white ethnic groups. The evidential base is clear that ethnic groups are more likely to have those problems, and I ask the Minister for any further information.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has highlighted the well-established links between women's experiences and their risk of developing a mental illness. For example, women are more likely to be on lower incomes, at risk of domestic abuse and have additional caring responsibilities. Almost always the lady of the house—the mum—is the carer. All of that increases the risk of developing a mental illness. Around one in five women experience a common mental disorder, such as anxiety or depression, compared with one in eight men, according to the most recent NHS adult morbidity survey. Despite this, there are still thousands of women and girls who struggle alone, and they could miss out on vital support as a result of that bias.

Margaret Ferrier: Poverty and food insecurity are not just about going hungry; as the hon. Gentleman said, there are knock-on effects on health and cognitive ability, and therefore educational attainment. People cannot concentrate on lessons or exams when they have not eaten all day, and that can be combined with the other factors that limit women's chances of breaking out of poverty in adulthood. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must give due focus to how their benefits policies may perpetuate the poverty cycle?

Jim Shannon: I think they do, but I have no doubt whatsoever that the Minister will answer our questions. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Hopefully, we will get an indication of what the Government are doing to address that.

The Department of Health and Social Care surveyed 100,000 women and found that 42% of women would not feel comfortable talking to a family member about their mental health condition, 36% would not feel comfortable doing so with a healthcare professional, and 30% with a friend. Young adults and women were more likely to report worse mental health and wellbeing during the first national lockdown than older adults and men.

Even before the pandemic hit, mental health services were not keeping up with demand. I ask the Minister: what has been done to improve mental health conditions, particularly for women in poverty? We must focus the resources on where the problems are. This debate is an opportunity to identify that. During the covid-19 crisis, school and nursery closures, and homeworking, became

a great problem for women, and contributed to poverty, as the hon. Lady referred to. It also contributed to a greater risk of psychological distress.

Reductions in local authority budgets have meant that a disproportionate number of women have taken up roles as unpaid carers. Again, is there anything we can do to help unpaid carers? I know that the Minister has been working hard on matters of gender equality and will continue to do so, but I honestly feel that the burden of children falls mostly on women, not due to the system we are in but due to a mindset. I think there is a mindset. For instance, whenever Naomi, my office assistant, had to take her daughter for surgery, she got parenting leave while her husband went to work. Without stress, her contract allowed for that first week. That is what a caring employer would do. I did that, but not everyone does.

A lady who worked in the retail sector came to see me. Her daughter took sick, and she had to take annual leave, as sick pay would not kick in for four days. Those are issues of unfairness in the equalities system. I was able to do the right thing; perhaps, other employers were not. That lady then had to work Christmas and new year, as she did not have the time off. To me, that is evidence of a clear inequality and is something that we need to address.

The reality is that the toll of poverty on women can be seen in the most despicable of ways. This is rather a sad case, but it is a factual case, and I used it without any names as an example in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. A lady took out a loan with a local loan shark to replace her cooker. She came to my office in tears. She had paid £500 back for her £300 cooker and yet was defaulting, according to the loan shark, and had been told—this is rather difficult to say in this Chamber—that she could pay off her loan in another way. She came to me in desperation. I was able to step in and point her to the help that she needed at that time, but I often wonder how many others find themselves in that particular predicament and how many women in poverty have been forced to do unspeakable things by people in their own community. That must end.

These women are hard working. Their poverty is nothing to do with their choices; it is to do with their circumstances, and we must work in this House to alter those circumstances. It is about the help that we can give. I believe that the Government must consider “women in poverty” funds within communities and that we must ensure that this Minister and her portfolio are funded appropriately, which must translate to help on the ground for the low-income mother who faces in-work poverty; for the lady who is asked to debase herself to provide a cooker for her family—how hard that must be for that lady, and for us in this House to be aware of that; and for the ill lady who has worked all her life, but is not entitled to enough help to deal with her illness and bring her out of poverty.

I support the calls of Marie Curie, which are particularly relevant for women in poverty, to give all terminally ill people access to their state pension regardless of age. It cannot be right that people who are forced to give up work due to their condition are left significantly more at risk of poverty in their final months and years simply because they are not yet old enough to claim the state pension. On average, terminally ill people in working age have made 24 years’ worth of qualifying national

insurance contributions by their last year of life. The hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West have also spoken about the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women on many occasions; again, I feel we have an example of that. Research shows that the Government could deliver change on those pensions for just 0.1% of the annual state pension bill. I am ever mindful that this is not the Minister’s ultimate responsibility, so if she was able to send this matter on to the responsible Minister, I would very much appreciate it.

I conclude with this: the question of women in poverty is a real issue in the UK and the solution must be real. I encourage the Minister to liaise with her Cabinet colleagues to find other ways and find additional funding that makes its way straight on to the ground for those women in dire circumstances and make the future brighter for children in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, like my three granddaughters, who deserve the best that can be offered. I thank you, Mr Sharma, for giving me the opportunity to play a part in the delivery of that goal. I look forward to others’ contributions, and in particular the Minister’s response. I find that the Minister always genuinely tries to respond in a positive fashion. I think she grasps the issues. Today, I have hopefully—in a very stuttering way—been able to put forward the case for women in poverty across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.22 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this debate forward; he is something of a legendary season ticket holder for Westminster Hall.

The ongoing cost of living crisis has no end in sight and is wreaking terrible damage on household incomes, families and even relationships across the United Kingdom. Particularly shameful is in-work poverty, when people are going out to work day in, day out and still cannot meet all the financial demands that they face.

We know that women are more likely to be living in poverty. They are more likely to be in lower-paid jobs, more likely than their male counterparts to be single parents, more likely to have caring responsibilities and even more likely to rely on social security. We also know that women are much more impacted by austerity measures, as they are more likely to rely to a greater degree on public services, which themselves are already under great pressure.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that families with younger children and lone-parent families, which are predominantly headed by women, face a disproportionate risk of poverty. Having younger children impacts on a parent’s ability to undertake paid work, the hours they can work and their pay, although it is important to say at this juncture that raising a child or children is work—something that often goes unrecognised.

Of course, women being able to undertake paid work when they have young children must be an option open to everyone who chooses to take it. Childcare has an important role to play here. Scotland is leading the way in childcare provision across the UK, although there is still more to do: there is no room for complacency. Scotland provides up to 1,140 hours of funded early

[*Patricia Gibson*]

learning and childcare a year—about 30 hours a week for three or four-year-olds, with some two-year-olds also eligible. In England, three and four-year-olds can access only around 570 free hours a year, which is about 15 hours a week.

We had a lot of fanfare around childcare in the recent Budget, but it does not really amount to much because it will be at least 18 months before it can happen and it was not accompanied by any detailed plan about increasing staff levels or infrastructure. Some people have said, quite cynically, that the reason for the announcement was less about substance than about what can be put on an election leaflet, which would be really sad if it were true.

The gender pay gap is another aspect that we need to think about when we are talking about women in poverty. It stands at around 15%, which widens dramatically when women have children. One way to close the gender pay gap—I know the Minister will be listening to this—is to mandate employers to report on the issue. It is, if you like Mr Sharma, effectively naming and shaming, putting the onus on employers to explain the gender pay gap in their organisations.

I am once again going to make a plea to the Minister to deliver a real living wage for workers, instead of the wee pretendy national living wage. It is both misnamed and misleading, since it is not based on the cost of living.

In addition to helping to support women in poverty, the UK Government must recognise that the policy of making single payments of universal credit to households can increase inequality in the welfare system and act as an enabler of domestic abuse or financial coercion. The Scottish Government continue to work with the UK Government to deliver split payments. I know that split payments are available in certain cases, but we really must ensure that we keep pushing so that it becomes the norm, so that we can protect more women financially.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Economic abuse is a term that has only begun to creep into our vocabulary in recent years, and it is different from financial abuse because it is a restriction of access to resources alongside money, and disproportionately impacts women. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a great deal of work to be done to raise awareness of that problem, particularly for women who may be victims but do not realise?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. Abuse becomes the norm for too many women if they have suffered it over many years, regardless of what form that abuse may take. So, yes, we really need to raise awareness. I think that automatic split payments for universal credit, unless otherwise specifically requested, is one of the ways that we could help to protect women from financial control.

I also ask the Minister to study closely the Scottish Government's Scottish child payment, which is now delivering £25 per week, per child, for those on the lowest incomes. It is projected that it will lift 50,000 children out of poverty in 2023-24. It has been hailed as "a game changer" by anti-poverty charities, backed up, as it is, with £442 million of funding from the Scottish Government in the next financial year. While the Scottish

Government are doing all they can to support household incomes—despite an increase in the block grant of a miserly 0.6%—they do so with one hand tied behind their backs, shackled, as they are, to this broken system.

Of course, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, there is also the gender pension gap. In old age, women are likely to be poorer than their male counterparts. Of course, that is easy to understand, because women are more likely to have had breaks in their working lives to raise children or undertake caring responsibilities, more likely to have been on low pay in their working lives, and more likely to have undertaken part-time work. As a result, women will suffer greater poverty in old age, living longer and suffering more years of poor health.

Age UK has shown that one in five women pensioners were living in poverty. Indeed, research shows that women, on average, would have to work an additional 16 years to retire with the same pension as men. Many of us have campaigned on the issue of the gender pension gap and are still waiting for the UK Government to expand auto-enrolment by removing the earnings threshold, a fairly simple step that would have an impact on women's pensions.

We cannot talk about women in poverty without acknowledging the great injustice inflicted on women born in the 1950s, who were robbed of their pensions and had their retirement plans thrown into chaos when the retirement age was raised with little or no notice, depriving them of tens of thousands of pounds of their rightful pensions. I pay tribute to the dogged determination of the WASPI women to campaign against the injustice they have suffered. As a result of that injustice, many have been thrown into poverty after a lifetime of low pay. Many have faced financial ruin, and, worse, many have died due to ill health without ever receiving their rightful pension.

While we are debating women in poverty, it has to be said that there is a widespread view that the way in which those women have been cruelly treated would never have happened to men. The truth is that those women were seen as an easy target for a Government wishing to cut spending, which is shameful. The fact that a whole generation of women had their retirement age increased with little or no notice is beyond shocking. Alongside that came poverty, indignity and hardship, which those women will not easily forgive. It would never have happened to a whole generation of men.

There are a number of things that this Government could do, and I urge the Minister to work with the WASPI women to work out how they can be compensated when the ruling on the matter is made. There are a number of things that the Government could do to support women in poverty. They could do more, but they are not. The UK Government control 85% of welfare spending, so I urge the Minister to use her office to ensure that the powers that lie with the UK Government are used judiciously to support women living in poverty. I have set out some of the ways the Minister might consider doing that; I hope that she takes note.

3.32 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. His regular appearances in this Chamber give us happiness, and we like to listen to him. It is good

to be here again. I also congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on her speech.

Let me begin by mentioning the anniversary, last week, of the birth of Margaret Bondfield, who was born on 17 March 1873. As you well know, Mr Sharma, Margaret Bondfield was our nation's first woman to serve in the Cabinet. Her life serves as a reminder to us all of how important it is for women to take leadership roles in politics. She was born in the south-west of England, and she knew and understood poverty in rural parts of our country. She moved to Brighton, where she worked as a shop worker—just like many women today work in retail. She saw how women workers were treated and she could not put up with it. She did not want to see women continuing to earn their poverty with little opportunity for change.

Margaret Bondfield became part of what is now the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. She worked her way up to become the first woman president of the TUC, before becoming a Cabinet Minister. I mention her because her life is a lesson on how we can stop women being poor. First things first: I hope the Minister agrees with me that we should put women in charge. However, it is not just about women being in charge but about what we do in this place for women. Margaret Bondfield campaigned for maternity benefits for mothers when that was seen as at the fringe of British politics, yet here we are talking about women's poverty as an important issue that we all, from whatever party, care about.

I would like to make a number of points, particularly on the structural underpinnings of women's poverty. We have heard a lot of granular detail from other speakers about the position of women in Britain today. Being a woman is a risk factor for being poor. All that we do to try to improve the position of women in British society is about taking apart those risk factors.

The central risk factor and the reason why women are put at risk of being poor is the historical economic assumption that care is done for free. Women's work looking after children, older members of the family and people who need care has traditionally been assumed to be done for free. As I say, all we do to try to prevent women from being poor is about making that assumption less certain. We all want to look after our families, but we should not assume that women should do this double duty of going out to work to earn an income and doing the caring for free. That is why over the years we have seen consensus that we need more and better childcare in this country, as well as much better adult social care.

Reflecting on the Budget, I think the Chancellor's announcement on childcare is welcome. I could make all the political arguments in the world about it being too slow and not enough, and I will ask the Minister some questions about the role of the Department for Work and Pensions in developing childcare in this country, but I am glad to have a cross-party consensus that we need to build up our childcare system, make it effective and make it anti-poverty, so that it helps support people who are most likely to be poor so that they earn enough to have dignity and a good quality of life.

On childcare, I ask the Minister what role the DWP plays, because we know the Department has to change. The national minimum wage provides a floor below which nobody who is working for a living should fall, but unfortunately pay progression has absolutely stalled.

When we think of where women are and about their ability to leave low-paid work, we see that pay progression is crucial for them. Has the DWP undertaken a study or analysed universal credit data to work out how it can play its part in developing a workforce strategy that will not only support all women in our workforce, but ensure that those who work in childcare are not at risk of poverty? The same is true for adult social care—it has to change. It can no longer be the case that women who cared for people who were suffering with covid or who, in many cases, died during the pandemic are the same women who are being paid poverty wages and are at risk of having to go to a food bank. That is not morally right, and I would love to know what work the DWP is doing to prevent that.

Women's rights at work have to be better. We know this from the lives of Margaret Bondfield, Barbara Castle, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and all those women who, from positions of leadership, have improved women's ability to earn. We want to see flexible working as a day one right. Having seen some of the evidence from the US of the impact of sexual harassment on women's incomes, I would be interested to know what analysis the DWP has done on whether women's lack of rights is holding back their earning abilities.

On the gender pay gap, it was absolutely galling to see companies applauding themselves for being part of International Women's Day and producing self-aggrandising content, when what we want to see is their gender pay gaps closing. We do not want woman of the year awards; we want better annual pay awards. Again, there is cross-party consensus that gender pay gap reporting has been a good thing, but we need to go further, and I hope the Government will support that.

Finally, on retirement, we have a shared ambition to increase the take-up of pension credit, which was introduced by the Labour Government to recognise that some people would have small pension entitlements, and that should be recognised. No one should be poor because they worked hard. Will the Minister say something about that? The take-up of pension credit is better for couples and worse for single people of both genders. Do we have any analysis as to why that is, and what can we do about it? Whether it is a parent of a young child, a parent of a teenager, or a woman in retirement, we want to make sure that step by step we remove all of the structural factors that make a woman a risk factor for being poor. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and his colleague, the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who is not here today, for securing this important debate. I followed the debate as a fellow Dolly Parton fan and it is a pleasure to engage on this matter. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) talked about happiness, and happiness is indeed Dolly Parton. Those who do not know what I am talking about should look at the early-day motion.

We are all here in Westminster Hall on a Thursday because we are passionate advocates of women's rights and want to improve their lives. Like the hon. Member

[Mims Davies]

for Wirral South, I pay tribute to the many ladies before us who trailblazed and gave us the opportunity to be here. On behalf of the Government, I commit to continue to support women at all ages and career stages. I fully recognise that, as the hon. the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, supporting children is an important role. Family life and that support is important.

I hope to cover quite a lot of the questions—I am keen to make my speech, too—but I want to point out that over the last decade the gender pay gap has fallen from 19.6% to 14.9%, although I fully recognise that, as the hon. Member for Wirral South says, there is more to do. The percentage of women in employment has risen from 66.1% to 72.2%. In practice, that means 2 million more women in work since 2010. The Government have overseen increased numbers of women in full-time work and introduced shared parental leave. I absolutely believe in shared parental responsibility, supporting children and being there. We have doubled free childcare for eligible parents and passed our landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to protect and support women and all those, including children, affected by that heinous crime. We will continue to build on that proud record of supporting women to provide a level playing field where everyone has fair and equal opportunities. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Wirral South.

On childcare and support for families, particularly for women, the Budget package for childcare has exceeded the expectations of many stakeholders. I welcome the points made by the hon. Member for Wirral South. I have spoken to many parents and visited nurseries. I also just met Save the Children. The increase of universal credit and childcare caps by around one third will help families, and those caps will continue to be uprated by the consumer prices index. I am meeting the Minister for Children, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), at the Department for Education next week, and I applaud the work that she has done.

The new free entitlements for working parents of young children can be used alongside the universal credit offer. That means full-time working parents on benefits across the country should not face childcare costs that exceed their free entitlements and caps. The DFE is also funding additional wraparound support for school-age children, and that can be used alongside universal credit. That is groundbreaking for those caring for children, and the reforms will revolutionise the amount of support that low-paid parents can receive.

We have spoken about some of those low-paid jobs and low-perceived sectors; the hon. Member for Wirral South made those points. It is really important that we tackle that issue. These are really important jobs that we particularly appreciated during the covid times—these people are doing the difficult jobs. It is really important that we support the people who go out, day in and day out, to do the difficult roles.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned mental health. He may have noted in the Budget that we will be embedding tailored employment support within mental health services and extending the well-established individual placement support scheme. That is really important.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is focused on this particular area and on carers. The Health and Safety Commission is also doing work in that area.

I say to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran that in the approach we showed throughout the pandemic and our response to cost of living pressures, we have been absolutely focused on acting to ensure that households get the support that they need. I am delighted that the powers that the Scottish Government have through the Scotland Act 1998 are being used to support the most vulnerable; that is exactly what they are there for. The partnership with DWP is welcome and has been very much strengthened. I am keen that we should continue to keep it under review and work strongly together. For those people who are struggling, I remind people that there are 1.1 million vacancies out there and we at DWP have all sorts of interventions that can help people to get into those roles. I will come on to that shortly.

I am very mindful of our particular role at DWP in mental health and wellbeing for women. Menopause has been a particular focus for me, particularly when it comes to anxiety and the impact on work. Menopause does not only affect women in their 40s or 50s; it can come at any age and at any career stage. Again, we have recently appointed the menopause employment champion, who will work collaboratively with businesses to ensure that the necessary information and resources are out there to support women. That champion is Helen Tomlinson, who is already cracking on with working with employers. NHS England's national menopause care improvement programme is also focused on improving clinical menopause care in England and on reducing disparities in treatment. Changes from April will provide support with prescription costs as well. I am very alive to the impact of menopause.

We also discussed carers. I have shared before that my family has been a caring family and shared the impact of that. I look back on the mental health and wellbeing of my mum with some shame, to be honest, about the lack of recognition of the support that people need. I listened to my constituents on Carers' Rights Day just recently. Disability, and the impact it has, can happen at any age or career stage. It could affect a child, or anyone later.

Carer's allowance provides a measure of financial support and recognition for people who give up the opportunity of full-time employment to provide regular and substantial care for anybody who is severely disabled. Just under 1 million people receive carer's allowance, which will increase in April, and receiving a means-tested benefit can be a passport to other support, including help with fuel costs and help through other schemes, such as the warm home discount scheme.

That is why I say to any constituent and to those who are watching: please have a look at the benefits calculator on gov.uk. People should make sure that they are claiming everything that they are entitled to. Many carers do not recognise that they are carers and that there is additional support out there for them.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her very detailed response. Sometimes people, for whatever reason—they may just have a busy life—perhaps do not have the opportunity to pursue the suggestions she has just made, which were

very positive. In many cases, I suspect that if they did make inquiries they would qualify for money. But is there any way that the Government could be more proactive on the issue, perhaps even by chasing the carers to ask whether they are aware of all their entitlements? Even a small leaflet through the post can make a big difference to a person who wants to understand what they could gain.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Charities such as Carers UK do an incredible job to help people in exactly that way; I know that as a former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers. I will pass the point about communications on to the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work. I remind people that, through DWP, we have the Help to Claim service, and if people head to the Help for Households website, that can help them as well.

Discussing this issue gives me the opportunity to talk again in this Chamber about our amazing caseworkers—those who signpost and support people in need and help them to recognise and understand the support that is out there.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran spoke about domestic abuse and coercive and financial control, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) also mentioned. Tackling violence against women is an absolute priority for this Government. These crimes are harmful; they have a profound effect on victims, survivors, loved ones, families and our wider society. The hon. Member for Wirral South was absolutely right that one's gender should not have an impact on how safe one feels or how well one can do. Times have to change.

Split payments are available in the universal credit system for all claimants who need them. A split payment is when the household universal credit award, which would normally be paid to the nominated account, is divided between two claimants. Split payments can be made to two separate members of a household, with a larger percentage allocated to the person with primary caring responsibilities, to ensure the health and wellbeing of the majority of the household.

That is a reminder for me to point out that if anyone is in need of any support—if they are under any control or are worried at all—a jobcentre is a safe place for them to disclose that, by using the “Ask for ANI” scheme and talking to their work coach. Departmental training and awareness are now better than ever, and there are now jobcentre staff who are specifically trained to support people experiencing any kind of domestic abuse, as there are in the Child Maintenance Service. That allows jobcentre staff to proactively identify, support and signpost victims of abuse. We are committed to the best possible support for our claimants, including those experiencing domestic abuse.

The hon. Member for Wirral South mentioned pension credit. That is vital financial support for pensioners on low incomes, which is why we launched a £1.2 million nationwide campaign in April 2022 to increase awareness and take-up, particularly for women who may be on a low income, whom we have discussed today. The most recent figures show, out of the pool of people who are entitled to pension credit, an estimated take-up of 66% for the financial year 2019-20. With the beginning of the pension credit awareness campaign in April 2022,

weekly pension credit claims volumes increased by 73% compared to the previous 12 months, so this is working. I hope that that reassures the hon. Lady.

We are undertaking further communications activities, and we are absolutely determined to have a broad reach. The DWP is writing to more than 11 million pensioners to notify them about the upcoming state pension uprating, and last year that notification was accompanied by a leaflet promoting pension credit. We plan to spend another £1.8 million until the end of this financial year communicating with those who might be entitled.

Jim Shannon: I welcome that. In my office—I am sure it is the same in yours, Mr Sharma, and those of all hon. Members—whenever pensioners come to see me, I always ask whether they are getting all their entitlements. The first thing we check is whether they are getting pension credit. They might not qualify for it, but we always check it. The other thing is that if age is not on their side and they are getting older, they may not be as physically strong as they once were, and attendance allowance is a benefit that is not emphasised enough. Could we put a wee bit of emphasis on that?

Mims Davies: I note the hon. Gentleman's point, which I shall take back to the Department forthwith. I hope that that pleases him.

Patricia Gibson: I am prompted to intervene by the comment from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In my constituency, Money Matters is an organisation that offers a free, confidential, comprehensive service by providing benefit checks to all constituents who are concerned about making ends meet. Does the Minister agree that the DWP is best placed to carry out those comprehensive benefit checks to make sure that people are receiving their full entitlement of support?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Interestingly, though, people do not particularly want to be labelled. Sometimes it is hard to make people understand that they are entitled. Alongside DWP's responsibility, we all have a responsibility in respect of that, through our constituency surgeries and through the third sector. It is a group responsibility, although I absolutely see her point.

There will be further accessible radio, print and digital advertising to make sure that we reach people who may not be online, as the hon. Member for Strangford noted. On his point about ethnic minority women entering and advancing in the workforce, that is an issue I am absolutely passionate about—if you cannot see it, you cannot be it. A recent roundtable at No. 10 very much focused on that issue.

At the end of 2022, there were more than 2 million ethnic minority women in employment. That has risen from more than 1 million in 2010—a 79.6% increase. We know that some ethnic minority women can face specific and challenging cultural barriers to moving into and thriving in employment. Therefore, our outreach work links up with organisations and employers to help those furthest away from the labour market to move into employment.

I was recently in Birmingham, a brilliant area for reaching out to those groups and working to understand the opportunities, where there is support with work

[Mims Davies]

experience to really help to build up confidence and employability. We are rolling out learning from a proof of concept, targeted at ethnic minority women, who may fail to engage and thrive in the labour market for many cultural and traditional reasons. In four local authority areas, jobcentres have appointed a women's community co-ordinator, offering wraparound support to help women with an ethnic minority background to thrive in employment, and we are looking to extend that further.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke delicately about sex for rent and other behaviours that some women may feel that they need to engage in to secure themselves. That is a focus of my colleague in the Home Office, the Minister for Safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines). When I was there very briefly, we took some steps to focus on the challenges and why people might feel pushed into something such as that.

I think I have answered most of the questions, and I will make a little progress with my speech. Northern Ireland has the second lowest unemployment rate in the UK at 2.4%, which is quite remarkable—a whole 1% lower than the UK average. As we know, work is the best way to earn more and move out of poverty, and that is reflected in the two statistics of low poverty and low unemployment. I take the point that for people for whom the barriers are highest, that probably makes no difference, and that is where we need to put our focus.

I was delighted to see that our interventions in the cost of living Bill—the Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Bill—received Royal Assent today; we are, again, focusing on the most vulnerable. I reiterate our absolute commitment to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty and better using the welfare system. In this coming financial year, we are uprating all benefits and state pensions by 10.1%. To increase the number of households who can benefit from those decisions, the benefit cap level is also increasing by the same amount.

A key area for us at DWP is focusing on low-paid work. We want to give people a range of options to help them to be better off, boost their skills and gain interview assistance, whether it is through our 50-plus interventions or by tackling additional barriers, disabilities or health conditions and extending our support through jobcentres.

Next month, the national living wage will be increased by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour, and that will benefit more than 2 million low-paid workers. That represents an increase of more than £1,600 in the annual earnings of a full-time worker who receives the national living wage.

The hon. Member for Wirral South spoke about childcare and the barriers to parents returning to work. The Budget measures and all those other things are being done at once. One of the challenges she laid down for me and my Department was to focus on the impact. She asked about the evaluations, which I am happy to share with her, and I will write to her further with some of those responses.

Members will be pleased to know that at the Budget, we announced an extension of the existing redundancy protection offered during maternity leave so that it will also apply to pregnant women and to new parents on

their return from maternity or parental leave. It will provide security to an estimated half a million more people at any one time.¹

I am conscious that I have spoken for some time, but there was a lot to cover; I appreciate Members' forbearance. The Government are fully committed to providing opportunities for women across the whole United Kingdom so that they can be successful in whatever they do. We want them to flourish and not be impeded by unfair and unjust barriers. We will continue to ensure that our support is targeted effectively to provide stability and certainty for everyone in these challenging times.

I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to respond, and to discuss the support available to women to lift them out of poverty and help them and their families lead fulfilling, productive and rewarding lives.

4.1 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank each and every person who contributed. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and I are always in debates together. That is the nature of our lives; we probably have the same interests. We are very interested in these subjects. She said that women are impacted by austerity even more than men are. She referred to the figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and she reflected on the necessity of closing the gender pay gap. She spoke about split payments and said that it is time to name and shame, and I agree. If someone is not doing it right, they need to do it right, and they need to be reminded of that. She also referred to what is being done in Scotland. We are often reminded of things that the Scottish Government are doing, and today we were reminded again of some good points that we should be taking on board. She also referred to the gender pension gap, and to compensation. Like her, I feel strongly that there is an anomaly that has to be addressed.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to those who keep homes together—mums and lone parents who look after the children. She referred to the pressure they are under and said that she sees that in her office, as we all do.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) brought a wealth of information to the debate. I really appreciated her contribution. She referred to Margaret—forgive me; I just could not make out the lady's name.

Alison McGovern: Bondfield.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady. I asked the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran about it, but we could not make out the name. Margaret Bondfield set a trend for powerful women who made a difference. She became the first female president of the TUC and a Cabinet Minister. Those are the people who led the way—the pioneers—and it is important that we remember them.

The shadow Minister also referred to the gender pay gap and to those in retirement. She talked about the structural underpinnings for women. Those are all important objectives; that is what we should be trying to do. She also referred to the working poor. She spoke about looking after the home, earning an income and looking after families—the challenge for women is worse, and it is harder than that of the menfolk. She also said

1.[Official Report, 27 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 8MC.]

that women's rights at work must be better, and she referred to flexible working. She made all those points well, and I really appreciated her contribution.

I thank the Minister, who came with a positive attitude. She said that everyone here was a passionate advocate for women's rights—that includes her, by the way. Looking after children is an important role in itself, never mind keeping the home going, and she spoke about childcare caps for women in poverty. We welcome the childcare measures, as did the shadow Minister and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran. The Minister referred to the work that has been done to ensure that full-time working parents benefit. She talked about the need to help the low-paid and she mentioned mental health pressures, which we all brought up; she recognises where such support needs to be. She referred to the extra moneys that were set aside in the Budget for that, for the carer's allowance—I have a massive interest in that—and for cost of living help. She referred to wellbeing and the menopause, and how women have to deal with many other things in their lives.

The Minister also referred to domestic abuse, as did the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, and to pension credit. We need to help people a wee bit more

with attendance allowance and other benefits. I appreciate the Minister's commitment. Sometimes what people need is just a wee bit of a nudge in the right direction. That is why when people come into the office, I always ask them what they are getting, so that we have an idea of what they should be getting but might not be. I think we can all be encouraged by the Minister's response.

I say to everyone who took part, and particularly to the Minister, that I hope that with this debate we can move things forward for women in poverty across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that we have a big task, but it is always easier when we have a Government and a Minister who are also committed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of support for women in poverty.

4.6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 March 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Post Office: Horizon Compensation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Post Office Horizon scandal, which began over 20 years ago, has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters. Starting in the late 1990s, the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded sub-postmasters cover the shortfalls, and in many cases wrongfully prosecuted them for false accounting or theft.

The High Court group litigation order case against the Post Office brought by 555 postmasters exposed the scandal. The House will know that Sir Wyn Williams is now chairing a statutory inquiry to establish what went wrong and identify those who were responsible for what has happened.

The settlement of the High Court case ensured that postmasters who had not been party to it would receive proper compensation through what is now the historical shortfall scheme. However, group litigation order postmasters had much of their compensation taken up by the associated costs of funding their case and they were ineligible to access further compensation through the historical shortfall scheme. This meant that they received less than those in similar circumstances who were not party to the case. Government have agreed to run an additional compensation scheme to put this right and to allow group litigation order postmasters to access similar compensation as that available to their historical shortfall scheme peers in similar circumstances.

On 7 December the then Secretary of State announced the outline of the scheme. Since then, a great deal of work has been done to finalise the details, drawing on helpful input from the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance and claimants' legal representatives as well as utilising lessons learned from the historical shortfall scheme and compensation for those with Overturned Historical Convictions. On 10 February the Government published a tariff (agreed with claimants' lawyers) for reasonable legal fees and a registration form.

In December we announced an independent advisory board on the scheme chaired by Professor Christopher Hodges and includes Lord Arbuthnot, Professor Richard Moorhead and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), all of whom have long been distinguished campaigners for postmasters. I am pleased to report that the advisory board has met three times, and reports of its meetings are on gov.uk.

We also said that we would follow an alternative dispute resolution model delivered by the Government. I can report today that we have appointed Dentons as our independent claims facilitators. Its role will be to promote fair and prompt resolutions of each case. We have also appointed Addleshaw Goddard to act as my

Department's external legal advisers on the scheme. They will take a collaborative approach, ensuring that there is no place for aggressive litigation in resolving claims.

I am delighted to tell the House that the scheme is open to receive claims from today. Details of how to submit claims can be found on gov.uk. Our legal powers to pay compensation run out in August 2024, but we certainly hope to make payments much faster than that. As the then Secretary of State told the House in December, we hope that most cases can be resolved before the end of 2023. I am placing documentation on the scheme in the Library of the House.

I am further pleased to report that the statutory instrument exempting group litigation order compensation from income tax, national insurance contributions and capital gains tax was laid before the Commons on 23 February and came into force on 16 March.

Historical Shortfall Scheme

I am also pleased to provide an update on Post Office's progress in delivering compensation to those in the historical shortfall scheme. I am pleased to see the progress that Post Office has made in delivering compensation to postmasters. As of 21 March, 98% of eligible claimants have been issued offers of compensation, totalling £90.2m. Post Office is working to issue offers to remaining claimants as soon as possible.

Post Office has also received 231 late claims to date, with 15 offers issued so far.

I also recognise the concerns that have been raised in recent weeks around the tax position of claimants in the historical shortfall scheme. It has always been the intention of the scheme to return postmasters to the position they should have been in had they not been affected by the Horizon issues. The Government want to see fair compensation for all victims and my Department is working urgently to address this issue with the Post Office, HM Treasury and HMRC.

Overturned Historical Convictions

I am also pleased to provide an update on Post Office's progress in delivering compensation to those with overturned historical convictions.

As of 20 March, Post Office had paid out over £17.6m in compensation. 79 of the 84 postmasters with overturned historical convictions had received interim payments, totalling over £10.2m. Post Office has reached full and final settlement with 4 postmasters. In order to deliver compensation as quickly as possible, Post Office is handling non-pecuniary and pecuniary claims separately.

A further 63 non-pecuniary claims had been received, of which all but three had received offers. 49 of these had been paid and settled, with one more claim paid, subject to settlement paperwork, which will bring the total to 50, once received.

In addition to the four full and final settlements, Post Office had made pecuniary settlement offers to four of the nine postmasters who had submitted a pecuniary claim.

[HCWS664]

JUSTICE

Family Law: Dispute Resolution and Mediation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Today the Government are launching a consultation that will inform proposals to support more families, in appropriate cases, to agree their children and financial arrangements without court involvement.

Family courts are under unprecedented pressure. In recent years, more families than ever before are applying to the court to resolve their disputes about children and financial matters, and once at court their cases are taking longer to be resolved. We believe that many of these disputes can be successfully resolved outside of court, and that in supporting this we can spare families, and especially children, the anguish of protracted litigation. Resolving more disputes outside of court will also help enable the courts to focus available resource on the cases that need to be there, including where domestic abuse is evidenced or there are urgent issues, and ensure these are resolved swiftly. This will help us to deliver on the levelling-up agenda by ensuring we improve the experience of parents across the country, including the most deprived areas.

Key proposals in the consultation include:

Supporting parents to resolve their children and financial arrangements without court involvement:

We propose to strengthen access to resources and guidance for parents/carers and separating couples, and seek views on requiring parents/carers, in appropriate cases, to attend a co-parenting programme alongside mediation to help them better understand their family's options.

Resolving private family law arrangements through mediation:

We propose to introduce a requirement, in appropriate cases, to make a reasonable attempt to mediate before applying to court. We are seeking views on how this could operate, and the circumstances that should make an individual or family exempt from the requirement. We propose that Government would fund the cost of this mediation for child arrangement cases and seek views on the funding of mediation for finance cases.

Accountability and costs in court proceedings:

We are also consulting on how costs orders could be used by the family courts to enforce requirements to mediate and discourage unnecessary prolonging of court proceedings.

The consultation also seeks views on the impact these proposals may have on the mediation sector, and the role of other forms of dispute resolution in family cases.

We want to hear from a range of people with experience of the private family law system, including families with experience of family courts, the organisations that work to support them, and the professionals who work within the system sector. We will be holding a number of stakeholder engagement events to ensure we receive detailed responses from a wide range of people and organisations.

The consultation is available at:
<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/>

The consultation closes on 15 June 2023.

[HCWS666]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Freeports: Wales

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today the UK and Welsh Governments have jointly announced that there will be two new Freeports in Wales: Celtic Freeport and Anglesey Freeport.

This is an important moment for people across Wales. Freeport status will support the creation of high skilled jobs, drive growth and level up parts of our great country that have been previously overlooked. Each freeport, subject to business case, will be backed by up to £26 million in UK Government funding, and a range of tax incentives, including locally retained business rates to upgrade local infrastructure and stimulate regeneration. This is alongside a generous package of trade and innovation support for businesses locating there.

These two new freeports will unlock significant funding for Wales, helping to boost the economy and ensuring the benefits are felt from Anglesey to Port Talbot and Milford Haven. They will help to create tens of thousands of new jobs, boost business, and unleash potentially billions of pounds of investment in the local areas and beyond. The strong bids from the Celtic and Anglesey sites compellingly demonstrated how they will use freeport status to regenerate their local communities, establish hubs for global trade, and foster an innovative environment.

Freeports are at the vanguard of levelling up: driving growth and bringing opportunity and prosperity to the communities that surround them. The new freeports in Wales will build on the UK Government's successful freeport programme in England, where all eight freeports are open for business, and in Scotland where two new green freeports have recently been announced.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that the whole of the UK can reap the benefits of our freeports programme. As well as freeports being set up in England, Scotland and Wales, we also continue discussions with stakeholders in Northern Ireland about how best to deliver the benefits associated with freeports there.

[HCWS665]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Incomes and Living Conditions: 2021-22 Statistics

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The Department for Work and Pensions has today published its annual statistics on incomes and living standards covering 2021-22. This includes households below average income (HBAI), which contains estimates of household incomes and a range of low-income indicators for 2021-22, derived from the family resources survey. Further publications in today's release are: income dynamics, pensioners' income series, children in low income families, improving lives indicators, separated families statistics and the family resources survey. These publications cover the four statutory measures of child poverty required to be published by DWP under the Child Poverty Act 2010.

This Government have overseen significant falls in absolute poverty since 2009-10, largely driven by increases in labour market participation, with 3.8 million more people currently in employment and sustained improvements to the national living wage, which will increase to £10.42 per hour from April. There were 1.7 million fewer people in absolute low income, and the rate has fallen by 4% after housing costs in 2021-22 compared to 2009-10. This includes 400,000 fewer children, 1 million fewer working-age adults and 200,000 fewer pensioners.

Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, median income grew by £8 per week in real terms but there was a slight increase in the number of people in absolute low income. This was driven by increases in the numbers of pensioners in absolute low income, due to lower occupational pension income and higher inflation than in the previous year, impacting the value of the state pension. For working-age people, absolute poverty rates were unchanged, with strong earnings growth offsetting the impact of the withdrawal of the unprecedented levels of Government support to protect incomes and jobs during the pandemic.

Building on the food insecurity data which this Government first published in 2019-20, we are publishing official estimates of food bank use for the first time. In 2021-22, 3%—0.8 million households—had used a food bank on at least one occasion in the past year. HBAI recorded that less than 0.1 million pensioner households used a food bank in the past year. In 2021-22 7% of individuals, or 4.7 million people, were living in households classed as food insecure, down from 8% in 2019-20.

These statistics are for 2021-22 so do not reflect the impact of the cost of living challenges caused by Putin's illegal war and global supply chain pressures. We recognised the pressures households faced as a result and acted, providing substantial cost of living support in 2022-23 including cost of living payments worth up to £650 for

those on means-tested benefits, £150 for eligible disabled people and £300 for pensioner households. At autumn statement 2022, the Government announced benefits and pensions uprating of 10.1%, the largest ever cash increase to the national living wage and generous cost of living support for 2023-24. This included additional cost of living payments for more than 8 million households on means-tested benefits, 6 million people on disability benefits, and 8 million pensioner households across the UK. It also included an additional £1 billion, including Barnett impact, to enable the extension of the household support fund in England, to help households with the cost of essentials. As announced at the spring budget, to further support households with the cost of living, the Government are maintaining the energy price guarantee at £2,500 for a further three months, from April 2023.

This Government are committed to obtaining the best evidence to ensure policies are targeted at helping the most vulnerable in our society. Last year a suite of further material deprivation measures were published. To further improve the evidence base, the Government are resuming work to develop experimental statistics based on the social metrics commission's innovative work on poverty measurement.

[HCWS667]

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Thursday 30 March 2023**

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