

Monday
17 April 2023

Volume 731
No. 146



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 17 April 2023

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 19 DECEMBER 2019]

FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 731

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 17 April 2023

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to announce that as part of our efforts to make the work of this House more widely accessible, British Sign Language interpretation will be available for all oral question sessions in the Chamber on parliamentlive.tv—starting today, with Education questions.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

School Buildings: Information on Condition and Safety

1. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the information her Department makes available on the condition and safety of school buildings. [904495]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Well maintained, safe school buildings are essential, and it is the responsibility of academy trusts and local authorities to maintain school buildings and keep them safe. The Government carried out a review of them back in 2014; since then, we have completed one of the largest reviews in the UK public sector, in which we reviewed every state school in the country, and we are

undertaking a further survey. We have allocated over £15 billion since 2015 to improving the condition of school buildings. That includes £1.8 billion committed for the financial year 2023-24. Our school rebuilding programme will transform buildings at 500 schools, prioritising those in poor condition with potential safety issues.

Dame Diana Johnson: I think the Secretary of State is presenting a rather rosy picture, because the Government have admitted that it is now very likely that some school buildings will collapse, owing to a decade of inadequate funding and serious structural issues. She did not say that her Department has failed to publish data on where those buildings are, and what repairs are needed. May I tell her about a school in Kingston upon Hull North, on Hall Road? It has been raising the alarm about its dilapidated state for many years, but so far under the school rebuilding programme it has only been selected to attend a seminar and fill in a questionnaire. Will she tell me when that school in my constituency will be rebuilt, as is absolutely necessary?

Gillian Keegan: I assure the House that there are no open areas in school buildings where we know of any immediate safety risk. If the Department is made aware of any dangerous building, immediate action is taken to ensure safety and remediate the situation. To address the challenges in the school estate, we first needed a true understanding of its condition. That is why it is so disappointing that over the 13 years of the last Labour Government, including when the right hon. Member served as Minister with responsibility for schools, there was not a single comprehensive review of the condition of the school estate, so we had a lot of work to do, but we now have full data.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Schools for the efforts made when asbestos was discovered in the King Edmund School. I appreciate the work that the Secretary of State is doing. Is she particularly concerned about the impact of aerated concrete on schools, and on children's education when remedial works are done?

Gillian Keegan: The Department is gathering information from the responsible bodies in all schools, further education colleges and local authority maintained nurseries. We are asking them to complete a questionnaire on the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete on their premises. That questionnaire covers nearly 22,000 schools, 230 further education settings and 371 nurseries. It is the responsibility of academy trusts and local authorities to maintain those settings and keep them safe, but we want settings to submit a response to the RAAC questionnaire, and I urge all those that have not yet done that to do so, so that we can take action.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): One of the first decisions that the Government made on coming to power was to cancel seven school rebuilding programmes in my constituency. Since then, we have seen greater cuts to local government spending, so the buildings have continued to disintegrate. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that some of the resources that she has mentioned will go to schools in Redbridge and Waltham Forest, to stop their further disintegration?

Gillian Keegan: Since 2015, we have allocated over £15 billion to maintaining and improving the condition of the school estate. Our school rebuilding programme will transform buildings at 500 schools; 400 of those have already been announced, including 239 in December, but there are more slots to allocate. We will prioritise buildings in poor condition and those with potential safety issues. The Minister for Schools is always happy to meet to discuss specific schools.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the school rebuilding programme, which is welcomed by Government Members—it is an innovation that we appreciate—will transform the educational environment of hundreds of thousands of children, particularly those in schools in the poorest condition?

Gillian Keegan: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I have been to many schools that are not only rebuilding the schools but transforming their facilities, so that children have excellent conditions in which to get the most fantastic education.

Safeguarding Children in Schools

2. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to safeguard children in schools. [904496]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The safety and wellbeing of our children is one of our highest priorities. Parents place their trust in teachers and schools and, by extension, in my Department. Those responsibilities are taken extremely seriously, and I pay tribute to all teachers for putting our children's safety first.

We provide schools and teachers with information and guidance to enable strong safeguarding in schools and colleges. Our “Keeping children safe in education” guidance and our searching, screening and confiscation guidance, updated in the light of recent events involving Child Q, support schools to create a safe environment for children.

Marsha De Cordova: The case of Child Q was shocking, but the recent report by the Children's Commissioner found that 14 strip searches took place either in schools or in a police vehicle, and states that that number could be higher because no location was recorded in 45% of cases. That report recommends changes to Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 codes A and C to strengthen the statutory safeguards for children, including excluding schools as an appropriate location for strip searches. Does the Secretary of State agree that that should be implemented as a matter of urgency, and will she press the Home Secretary to get on and implement all the report's recommendations in full?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I want to be clear that any use of strip search should be carried out in accordance with the law, following safeguarding codes of practice, and with full regard for the dignity and welfare of the individual being searched.

As the hon. Lady has said, the Children's Commissioner recommended that schools be specifically excluded as an appropriate place to strip search children. That is a recommendation that the Home Office will need to consider, and my Department would need to update any schools guidance accordingly. The Home Office does not hold figures on the number of pupils strip searched by police officers in primary or secondary schools each year, or on how many of those searches were conducted without an appropriate adult present, but it has now introduced a data collection on strip searches to the annual data requirement. That data collection includes details on the age, sex and ethnicity of the persons strip searched by police in England and Wales.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I welcome that there will be a review of the teaching of relationships and sex education—that review cannot come quickly enough. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the scope of the review will include extracurricular activities and clubs and assemblies, as well as timetabled RSE lessons? I have had quite serious parental concern expressed about both.

Gillian Keegan: As my hon. Friend rightly says, we are undertaking a review of relationships, sex and health education guidance in our schools, and I have asked the Department to look at wider settings as part of that.

Mental Health Training in Schools

3. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase mental health training in schools. [904497]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Schools promote and support the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils to help them thrive and reach their potential. My Department is helping schools to develop effective approaches to mental health by offering senior mental health lead training. More than half of all state schools and colleges have received that training grant since September 2021. To give children more access to support, we are increasing the number of mental health support teams from 287 in 2022 to 400 in 2023, and the number of teams will grow to 500 in 2024. I recently visited St Wilfrid's Catholic School in Crawley, where I saw the fantastic work done by that school and

West Sussex's mental health support team to offer one-to-one support and group sessions for pupils who are struggling to prepare for their next steps.

Giles Watling: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comprehensive answer. Like a few other colleagues, I recently visited Baton of Hope UK, whose work on suicide awareness and prevention is second to none—it is admirable. Will she commit to meeting Baton of Hope to further its efforts to improve children's access to mental health support?

Gillian Keegan: Many of us and our families have been struck by the tragic loss of loved ones to suicide, and we must work together to support young people's mental health and to prevent suicide. A new suicide prevention strategy will be published this year, and we are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to drive progress on reducing youth suicides and helping children to access the support they need.

Baton of Hope is a brilliant organisation that does excellent work in raising awareness and on prevention. I met Mike McCarthy, who is the co-founder of Baton of Hope, when I was the Minister for care and mental health, and I am sure that my successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), would welcome its input to this important work.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): An investigation by *The House* magazine found that a quarter of a million children struggling with their mental health who were referred to the NHS were either denied treatment or redirected elsewhere due to burgeoning caseloads. I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that schools play a vital preventive role in building children's resilience and ensuring that the NHS is not overwhelmed, yet the mental health support teams in schools programme is due to end abruptly in 2024. Will she assure the House that that programme will continue and reach every school in the country?

Gillian Keegan: As the hon. Lady rightly says, the programme is continuing up to 2024. We are evaluating its success, and the early signs are that it is vital in helping more children access lower-level mental health support, such as group and one-to-one sessions. We will certainly be putting the case forward for continuing the roll-out of this successful programme.

Children's Social Care Implementation Strategy

4. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the children's social care implementation strategy on (a) the social care sector and (b) children in care. [904498]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): Our reforms will deliver transformational change in children's social care. The strategy we set out, "Children's social care: stable homes, built on love", will put in £200 million of additional investment to lay the foundations for wider reform. Our approach balances the need to scale complex intervention safely and effectively with evidence at its heart and the need to address urgent issues immediately.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer, but here is the reality: 34 children that we know of aged 16 and over in the state's care have died in unregulated accommodation. The last time I asked the Secretary of State about this, she said that regulations would be introduced, yet those regulations shamefully legitimise unregulated accommodation, placing more of these children in tents and caravan sites, alone and without any care or supervision at all. What on earth is she playing at?

Claire Coutinho: We have taken steps forward on regulating accommodation. We are working closely with the sector. We are going further than we ever have before to make sure that we can have not only quality accommodation for some of our most vulnerable children, but quality of care too. I know that the hon. Lady cares deeply about this issue, and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

Disadvantage Gap in Schools

5. **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle the disadvantage gap in schools. [904499]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has been the guiding star leading all our education reforms since 2010. Central to that has been ensuring that children are taught to read in the first years of primary school using systematic phonics, the method that all the evidence says is the most effective way to teach children to read. In PIRLS, the progress in international reading literacy study of the reading ability of nine-year-olds, England rose from joint 10th to joint eighth in 2016, which is largely attributable to improvements in reading by the least able children.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The Minister paints a rosy picture, but the disadvantage gap continues to be wider than it was in 2019 and the Government have limited the uptake of education recovery programmes, such as the national tutoring programme, and failed to ensure that tutoring was always directed towards the most disadvantaged pupils. Worse still, they have provided less than a third of the funding that their own education recovery commissioner recommended. Will the Minister commit today to increasing funding to meet these urgent needs?

Nick Gibb: During the eight years prior to the pandemic, the disadvantage gap closed by 13% in primary schools and by 9% in secondary schools by 2019. The hon. Lady is right that the gap widened over the course of the pandemic, which is why we introduced the national tutoring programme, providing intensive one-to-one and small group tuition to those who have fallen behind. It is why altogether we are spending £5 billion on an ambitious multi-year education recovery plan, why the recovery premium is targeted towards the most disadvantaged and why the pupil premium, introduced by the Conservative-led Government in 2010, is being increased from £2.6 billion to £2.9 billion this year.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on having the bravery when he first entered the Department back in 2010 to narrow the disadvantage gap and stand up to the unions when

it came to some big reforms in our education sector. It is just a shame that the Labour party continues to stay silent while the unions hold children's futures to ransom over the fact that they want teachers to continue striking, no matter the disruption it will cause to children's learning and, potentially, their ability to pass their exams in the summer. What work is being done to ensure that students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, do not have to suffer because union baron bosses such as Bolshevik Boustead and Commie Courtney seem to want to destroy the lives of the young people they serve?

Nick Gibb: Well, my hon. Friend makes an understated case for making sure that young people are in school, and it is disappointing that pay negotiations are being conducted by holding strikes. We have reissued guidance to schools to make sure that, where schools have to restrict attendance, they prioritise the most vulnerable children, the children of critical workers and, of course, children in exam years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The Government's failure to invest in our schools and children has been laid bare, with disadvantaged pupils now further behind their peers than at any point in the last 10 years. Given that the Minister has been in post for the vast majority of that period, what does he put this failure down to?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman obviously did not hear the answer to the original question. We had actually closed the attainment gap prior to the pandemic by 13% in primary schools and by 9% in secondary schools. Of course, the gap did widen during the pandemic, which is why we are allocating £5 billion to help children catch up. The hon. Gentleman really ought to condemn the strikes that have been happening in our schools, because the worst thing we can do to help children catch up is to close a school.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It has been revealed by openDemocracy that private schools received more than £157 million in Government loans during the pandemic. Just one of those loans has cost taxpayers over £350,000 in fees and interest, and another was received by a school that recorded a financial surplus of £13 million in the year it used the loan. Will the Minister explain why such funds were not available to state schools to help tackle the disadvantage gap?

Nick Gibb: Actually, we are spending £5 billion helping schools to tackle the disadvantage gap and help children catch up. We funded schools fully throughout the covid pandemic, and we provided over £400 billion of support to the UK economy and to families up and down the country during the covid crisis.

Lifelong Learning

6. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to promote lifelong learning. [904500]

13. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to promote lifelong learning. [904509]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The lifelong loan entitlement will ensure everyone has access to opportunities to upskill and reskill to progress in their careers. We have led a huge raft of reforms to the skills system since 2016 to deliver on this ambition, building on the reviews led by Professor Alison Wolf, Lord Sainsbury, Sir Philip Augar and others. Over this time, we have worked with over 5,000 employers to deliver apprenticeships, backed by the landmark £2.7 billion apprenticeship levy. The £3.8 billion we are investing over this Parliament will support more people to benefit from apprenticeships, skills bootcamps, T-levels, free courses for jobs and new returnerships, and will deliver our flagship institutes of technology.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that comprehensive reply. It is welcome that the Government, in their response to the lifelong loan entitlement consultation, have acknowledged the need for maintenance support. However, so that lifelong loans are available to the many and not to the few, can my right hon. Friend ensure that there is a clear pathway for those who do not yet have level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels, to participate in this vital initiative and ensure that it is the game changer that will unleash the skills revolution?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend, and I agree with him that there should be a clear pathway. That is why level 3 courses are fully funded for a range of individuals through funding streams such as free courses for jobs, the adult education budget and advanced learner loans. The adult education budget allows eligible adult learners aged 19 to 23 undertaking their first full level 3 course to be fully funded, and free courses for jobs gives eligible adults the chance to access high-value level 3 courses—423 of them—for free. The Government aim to support learners building up or stacking up LLE-funded modules on pathways to full qualifications across their working lives.

Stephen Metcalfe: Building on that answer and on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), will my right hon. Friend tell the House what her ambitions are for lifelong loan entitlements and when they might come into force, so that older potential learners in Basildon and Thurrock can start to reskill for the 21st century?

Gillian Keegan: The lifelong loan entitlement will radically transform opportunities for people, including the nurse I met outside my local hospital in Chichester, who retrained having worked for years as a domiciliary. Thousands of people like me who look for a change of career later in life have used the apprenticeship system, but now all providers registered with the Office for Students will have the opportunity to deliver LLE-funded courses, which will initially focus on higher technical qualifications, helping to address skills gaps to support learners into jobs where employers have need. The LLE will be introduced from academic year 2025-26.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Learning opportunities should be there for everyone everywhere, yet since 2010 almost 4 million fewer adults have taken part in learning, thus holding back their learning and economic potential and our country's productivity. It has been a decade of decline, which we cannot afford to continue, so will the Secretary of State back Labour's plans for a better skills system, working for people and businesses across the country, starting with the urgent reform of the apprenticeship levy, which she will have heard criticisms of, just as we have?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady may have some different figures, because 5.4 million people alone have been trained as apprentices and about half of them have been adults. But we have done a lot to reform our skills system, working with 5,000 employers to make sure that business and education meet. We are very happy with the reforms we are making and think they will offer a lot more opportunity for lifelong learning to support adults with the skills they need.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): For many refugees and asylum seekers, access to lifelong learning is all the more important because their learning may have been disrupted. On Friday, my constituent Grace Franklin, a volunteer ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—teacher, and Maryhill Integration Network both raised with me access to ESOL classes for asylum seekers and refugees, which is often hampered by people staying in temporary hotel accommodation. What commitments do the UK Government have to invest further in ESOL in England, so that Scotland can benefit from the Barnett consequential?

Gillian Keegan: We have the adult education budget scheme, which is often run by local authorities and devolved in some cases to the mayors as well, and that includes ESOL provision.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill could be transformational to post-16 education. However, in annexe 2 to the recent 2023-24 ministerial guidance letter to the OFS, the Secretary of State slashed funding for LLE preparation by £5 million. These are clearly complex and expensive changes for the sector to address, so how does she expect the sector to deliver these reforms without the funds to do it?

Gillian Keegan: The LLE will be available for four full years of study, for higher technical and degree level and, for the first time, for modules of high-value courses regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities. Of course this is a big change and we are engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to gather the input to inform policy development, to build further awareness and to inform future budget development.

Early Years Support for Families

7. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure families have access to adequate early years support. [904501]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): In the past five years, we have spent more than £20 billion supporting families with the cost of childcare. Since 2010, we have introduced the offer for disadvantaged two-year-olds and doubled the entitlements for working parents of three to four-year-olds, and we are now going further and have announced 30 hours of free childcare for children of working parents from nine months.

Mary Kelly Foy: I recently visited the outstanding Laurels Childcare Company in Durham to listen to its concerns about childcare funding. Such providers are crying out for clarity on the Government's plan. More free hours must not mean more underfunded hours. The Government admitted in 2020 that it costs £7.49 to deliver an hour of free childcare for a three-year-old, yet in September providers will be paid just £5.50 for those hours. Can the Minister tell me why?

Claire Coutinho: We conducted a survey of 10,000 different providers, and that is what we have used to set out the funding rates. In some of those areas, for example, for two-year-olds, the rate is going up by 30% because we know that is a much higher cost for providers, but overall we have announced the single biggest investment ever in childcare and will be spending £8 billion on this in four years' time.

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

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): The commitment in the Budget to invest in childcare in the early years was extremely welcome and I congratulate my hon. Friend on her part in securing it. Can she update the House on the feedback she is getting from the sector on the proposed funding rates and whether they will allow it to meet the inflationary pressures it is facing, including soaring business rates bills? Will she continue to address with the Treasury some of the unavoidable costs, such as the increase in the national living wage and the business rates increases, faced by the sector?

Claire Coutinho: As I said, we used feedback from the sector—we surveyed about 10,000 different providers—to come up with the rates, and as we progress we continue to talk and work closely with it. There has been a lot of positivity about the rates we set out, in particular for one and two-year-olds, and the £200 million we are putting in this year and the £288 million we will be putting in next year.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): One thing I am most concerned about in terms of educational attainment in early years and primary is food insecurity, which is rising in all our constituencies. Much of this is devolved, of course, but I do not want to see hungry kids anywhere and hungry kids cannot learn. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that seven out of 10 children in families on universal credit are not entitled to free school meals. Do Ministers not agree that they should be?

Claire Coutinho: We have increased the number of children on free school meals to the highest ever level. We also have programmes such as the holiday activities and food programme—one of the things I visited over

the recess—which is providing nutritious meals alongside activities. We are doing a lot to support parents with the cost of living, too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to the work done by the private sector, and in particular to Busy Bees, which was founded in Lichfield 40 years ago this year and operates over 400 nurseries in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Europe and the United States of America, and wish it well for the next 40 years?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is testament to the fact that good things come out of Lichfield. I have met Busy Bees a couple of times. It does some really impressive things, in particular on retention of staff and training programmes. I wish it well in the years to come.

Degree Apprenticeships

8. **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the uptake of degree apprenticeships. [904503]

22. **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the uptake of degree apprenticeships. [904519]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): My hon. Friend will know that “degree apprenticeships” are my two favourite words in the English language. My hon. Friend’s constituency of Wantage has had 330 extra degree-level apprentices since 2018. We have had over 180,000 starts overall since 2014 and we are investing an additional—an additional—£40 million over the next two years to support degree apprenticeships.

David Johnston: My right hon. Friend is a great supporter of degree apprenticeships, as am I, but he will know they do not always function as the route for social mobility that they should. We have seen a much higher proportion of the most affluent young people obtain them than we have the poorest young people, so what is he doing to ensure disadvantaged students get their fair share of degree apprenticeships?

Robert Halfon: We are transforming careers advice on apprenticeships in our schools and targeting that advice towards disadvantaged students. The Office for Students has asked higher education to increase the proportion of level 4, 5 and degree apprenticeships as part of reforms to wider access. We also increased the care leavers bursary from £1,000 to £3,000, and are providing £1,000 to employers and training providers when they recruit young people. Our determination is to get more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds doing degree apprenticeships and apprenticeships across the board.

Siobhan Baillie: During a recent visit to the excellent South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, the Minister and I were quite properly schooled by two smart apprentices, who told us quite bluntly what they thought of the Government communications campaign to encourage apprenticeships and raise awareness of them. They were not hugely impressed and had some ideas themselves.

After meeting the Stroud apprentices, will my right hon. Friend consider creating a new national campaign to raise awareness of this really important use of learning?

Robert Halfon: I had a wonderful visit with my hon. Friend to the excellent South Gloucestershire and Stroud College. She is absolutely right that we need to communicate the good work of apprenticeships and we are doing exactly that. We have a national campaign, Skills for Life, which is all over the national media. As I mentioned in my previous answer, we are also transforming careers advice on apprenticeships to ensure that students and learners have interactions with apprentice organisations to encourage them to do apprenticeships when they leave school. We have also worked with UCAS to ensure that apprenticeships are treated at the same level as when people apply for degrees.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The number of apprenticeship starts has dropped significantly this year, and around £600 million of the levy was returned to the Treasury in the last year. Given the skills shortages affecting our economy, would it not make sense to let businesses in my constituency and elsewhere utilise at least some of that returned money for relevant non-apprenticeship training designed to alleviate the skills gap?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman cares passionately about these things. Apprenticeship starts increased by 8.6% in the past year. I am happy to send him the figures. For higher apprentices, that increased by 11%. The £600 million that he talked about—or £750 million, as quoted by the newspapers over the weekend—is money from the overall United Kingdom apprenticeship levy that was sent to the devolved authorities for them to spend on skills as they see fit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that response. It is important that everyone has the opportunity to do degree apprenticeships, working in partnership with businesses and companies to ensure that the opportunity works on the floor. It is important that ladies have the same opportunities as men. How is the Minister ensuring that ladies have those opportunities as well?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right that we want to encourage more women to do apprenticeships, especially STEM apprenticeships. As I mentioned, we are doing a lot of work on careers. The apprenticeship and skills network is going around schools promoting apprenticeships and targeting disadvantaged students and areas where we need more female apprentices, including in STEM.

Apprenticeships: People Over 16

9. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage people over the age of 16 to take up apprenticeships. [904504]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): My right hon. Friend and I are passionate about apprenticeships. We are promoting this excellent route into a career through our apprenticeship support and knowledge programme in schools and our career starter

apprenticeships campaign. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education mentioned, we are working with UCAS so that people can search and apply for apprenticeships alongside degrees, creating a one-stop shop for young people.

Priti Patel: The Secretary of State is a fantastic advocate for apprenticeships. Importantly, she recognises the need to open up training and apprenticeship opportunities for school leavers. We can never forget them. Will she join me in thanking the many local businesses in Witham that supported my recent careers fair held in a local school? On top of that, will she look at how to make the apprenticeship levy much more agile and flexible so that more school leavers participate in the scheme, and look at devolving more skills funding to Essex?

Gillian Keegan: I share my right hon. Friend's appreciation of the wonderful employers in Essex that are building the next generation—such as Stansted airport, Rose Builders and Simarco—as someone who left school at 16 and started on that route. I know through my right hon. Friend's work, more than 8,000 apprentices have started in Witham since 2010, many in engineering, automotive and aerospace.

More than 99% of the apprenticeships budget was spent last year, which is a fantastic demonstration of the value that apprentices bring to businesses. We will continue to ringfence the levy to support that demand. Essex Chambers of Commerce are working with employers to develop a local skills improvement plan. We look forward to working more with them and local employers on their needs.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I never thought I would hear myself say this, but I totally agree with the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who rightly urges the Minister to support Labour's policy on greater flexibility for apprenticeships. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development described the Government's approach to apprenticeships as having “failed by every measure”. Alongside starts having fallen by a third, the Government's own data shows that 47% of apprentices do not complete their apprenticeships. Will the Secretary of State join me, the Labour party and the right hon. Member for Witham in supporting the wide range of businesses and employers that support Labour's plans for reform of the apprenticeship levy?

Gillian Keegan: I understand that many employers have asked for that, but it is as ill-thought-through and ill-designed as Labour policies such as the tax on private schools and non-dom status. We are already spending 99.6% of the levy, so Labour's policy would mean that we would have to take some apprentices away from SMEs to be able to create that levy.

High-quality Apprenticeships: Access

10. **Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind):** What steps her Department is taking to improve access to high-quality apprenticeships. [904506]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): We are improving quality and supporting more apprentices to successfully complete their programmes. We have moved from frameworks to standards, we have asked all apprenticeship providers to reregister on the register of apprenticeship training providers, Ofsted will inspect all providers by 2025 and we have provided £7.5 million for a provider workforce development programme.

Rob Roberts: A constituent was in touch with me recently as his daughter has started a level 3 veterinary nursing qualification. There are no places to take that qualification in north Wales, so she registered with a training provider just across the border, in Chester. As she works for a veterinary practice in Colwyn Bay and spends more than 50% of her practical learning time in Wales, she is not eligible for English apprenticeship funding, yet the Welsh Government say that, because the training provider is based in England, she is not eligible for Welsh apprenticeship funding either. Can my right hon. Friend tell me why it is so difficult for the UK and Welsh Governments to work together on such things, so that people such as my constituent do not fall through the cracks?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend has been a battler for his constituent and has written to me about this case. A 50% rule has been developed to support apprenticeship training for those who spend some of their time working in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. That rule is maintained, but I will continue to support cross-Government collaboration to see if these problems can be sorted out and I am happy to write to the Welsh Government about his constituent's case.

Independent Schools

11. **Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con):** What recent assessment she has made of the quality and value of education provided by independent schools in England. [904507]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Independent schools, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency, are an important part of our school system, giving parents choice. Independent schools drive innovation, support social mobility through bursaries and attract significant international investment. The diverse independent sector includes schools that serve small faith communities and that create special school capacity.

Sir Christopher Chope: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Can he ensure that other members of the Government show similar enthusiasm for the work and achievements of the independent schooling sector? Will he take this opportunity to thank all the families who make significant financial sacrifices to pay the fees of those schools for acting in the public interest and saving taxpayers quite a lot of money?

Nick Gibb: I am very happy to do that. My hon. Friend will be interested to know that approximately 8% of pupils attending Independent Schools Council schools receive around £480 million of bursaries and means-tested assistance.

Early Years Provision

12. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase early years provision. [R] [904508]

16. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase early years provision. [904513]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): We are removing one of the biggest barriers to parents working by vastly increasing the amount of free childcare that working families can access. By 2027-28, we expect to be spending in excess of £8 billion every year on free hours and early education, helping working families with their childcare costs.

James Daly: As chair of the APPG on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes, may I welcome the extended entitlement introduced in the spring Budget, but will the supplementary funding to nursery schools be increased to cover the total entitlement, not just the 15 hours universal entitlement?

Claire Coutinho: The Government recognise that maintained nursery schools make a valuable contribution, improving the lives of some of our most disadvantaged children. We will provide further details on funding arrangements for the new entitlements for 2024-25 in due course.

Greg Smith: One of the multiple barriers to increasing early years provision is the availability of suitable and affordable premises in which to run pre-schools. For example, Chearsley and Haddenham under-fives pre-school in my constituency, known locally as CHUF, is on notice to vacate its current Haddenham site and has just over a year to find brand new premises. What can my hon. Friend's Department do to support CHUF in its search for a new Haddenham site? What steps is she taking, in particular with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to ensure sites for childcare provision are fully included as an essential item to be funded through the new infrastructure levy?

Claire Coutinho: Under the new infrastructure levy, which is being introduced through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, local authorities will have the flexibility to direct funds towards their own infrastructural priorities. That definitely includes childcare facilities. The Department also has regular contact with each local authority in England about its sufficiency of childcare and any issues that it may be facing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): In the spring Budget, the Chancellor announced new incentives for people registering as childminders, and a double incentive to register with childminding agencies. Will the Minister set out why she considers it necessary to incentivise childminders to sign up with agencies, and what conversations she and the Secretary of State had prior to the Budget with the Prime Minister and the agency in which his wife is a shareholder?

Claire Coutinho: There is a very simple reason: we subsidise Ofsted's registration costs, so a registration costs it about £35, whereas registering a childminder can cost a childminding agency £500-plus. The discrepancy is simply to balance out the fact that they have different costs. I know that the No. 10 team is collaborating with the commissioner to establish the facts and show that everything has been transparently declared.

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

15. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families. [904511]

21. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families. [904518]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I want every child and young person, regardless of their special educational need or disability, to receive the right support to enjoy their childhood, succeed in their education and feel well prepared for their next step. The SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, which was published last month, sets out the next steps that we are taking to deliver a more positive experience for children, young people and families.

Catherine West: Today's *Guardian* front page and our own *House* magazine lay out the disabling effects of severe mental health crisis among our young people. What urgent action will the Minister take to ensure wider access to crucial child and adolescent mental health services so that talking therapies can be delivered on time and be effective, and so that children can retake their learning and get on with their studies?

Claire Coutinho: We are working closely with our counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care, which is investing billions to ensure that 345,000 children can access CAMHS support. We are also rolling out mental health support in schools and are setting out best practice guides this year on a range of SEND issues. One of the first will be mental health and wellbeing, so that all teachers in all settings can ensure that they are doing the right thing.

Fleur Anderson: The Children and Families Act 2014 sets out national standards in legislation for children with special educational needs and disabilities, but those legislative safeguards have not succeeded in delivering appropriate support for children and young people. Special needs school staff in Putney are excellent, but they have highlighted to me that the lack of funding or link-up to social care services—and to mental health services, as the Minister has highlighted—is the major barrier to providing the care that is needed. Why does the Minister believe that having new standards in the plan, but no new legislative underpinning, will deliver better outcomes?

Claire Coutinho: One thing that we have tried to do in the reforms is get under the bonnet and find out why local authorities are struggling to deliver. That is why we are setting out a specialist workforce strategy and looking at initial teacher training: to ensure that we can catch things early and address them. I reassure the hon. Lady that we published the strategy in tandem with the Department of Health and Social Care, because we know that it is critical to achieving that.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It was recently proposed that the caretaker's bungalow at Bridgewater Primary School in Berkhamsted was to be used for adult social care purposes, against the wishes of the school and many parents, who wanted to use the space to provide wraparound care provision. Of course I recognise the need for adult residential care, but does the Minister agree that we should be jumping at such opportunities to provide on-site provision for SEND students?

Claire Coutinho: That particular decision will be one for the local council, but one thing I will say is that we are asking areas to set out local inclusion plans, not only so that they can assess all the need in their area, but so that we can assess whether they are meeting it.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): While we all recognise the importance of increased maths, which has been much discussed today, it is vital for children's life chances that literacy continues to improve. The only way to achieve that is by having better provision for children with special educational needs, including dyslexia, so will the Minister ensure that that continues to get the drive that it needs? Will she update the House on where she is up to with the improved teacher training that was committed to in the excellent paper earlier this year?

Claire Coutinho: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that literacy is one of the major priorities for the Department. We will be setting out best practice guides on early speech and language. In tandem with the phonics tests, they will be a really good way to screen children for dyslexia and make sure that with our initial teacher training improvements we are capturing and helping children who are struggling with things like dyslexia, as soon as possible.

Topical Questions

T1. [904520] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This morning I visited the London Screen Academy with the Prime Minister, who described his vision of all young people studying maths until the age of 18. We have set out the next step towards making that a reality and delivering a truly transformational change for the economy and society. As the Prime Minister made clear today, this is not about requiring every young person to study A-level maths but about ensuring that all young people have the skills that they need in order to succeed in a broad range of industries, as well as the life skills that will enable them to deal with the challenges that we all face, from securing the best deal at the supermarket to taking out credit or applying for a mortgage. We are

assembling an expert advisory group to advise the Prime Minister and me on what a "best in class" modern maths offer to 16 to 18-year-olds looks like, and we will draw on that updated research, which will help us to learn from the race ahead of our international competitors.

Mark Menzies: I thank the Secretary of State for the record levels of capital spending that we are seeing in Fylde's schools, most notably on the rebuilding of Lytham St Annes High School. However, the job is never done. Carr Hill High School in Kirkham, and other schools in my constituency, are seeking funds with which to modernise buildings and facilities. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss the capital requirements of those schools?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the Government's investment in school buildings. We recently announced the provision of £1.8 billion to fund improvements in the condition of schools in 2023-24, which includes about £15 million for Lancashire County Council, the body responsible for Carr Hill High School. As my hon. Friend said, we have transformed Lytham St Annes High School via the school rebuilding programme—and of course we will be happy to meet him.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): As this is the first session of Education questions since the tragic death of Ruth Perry was made public, may I take the opportunity to extend my condolences and those of the entire Labour party to her family, her school community, and everyone who knew her?

Parents know that accountability is crucial for our schools. A year ago I said that as Ofsted turned 30, it was time for it to turn a corner. The former chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has now said that the Secretary of State must respond as a matter of urgency to what he describes as "a groundswell of opinion building up" that Ofsted is getting some things wrong. Does the Secretary of State still believe that there is no room for improvement in the inspection of schools?

Gillian Keegan: I always think that there is room for improvement in absolutely everything. Ruth Perry's death was a terrible tragedy, and my deepest sympathies are with her family, her friends, and the whole school community. A shocking event such as this will inevitably raise questions about inspection practice, which is understandable, but the safeguarding of pupils is also vital. I know that His Majesty's chief inspector of education, children's services and skills has listened to school leaders who have expressed concern about the way in which safeguarding is inspected, and is reviewing the current approach as part of an ongoing process of evaluation and development, and I welcome that.

Bridget Phillipson: That is why, as we have said, Labour believes that safeguarding reviews should take place annually. Reducing schools' performance to a one-word headline means high stakes for staff but a low level of information for parents. The current Ofsted chief inspector has described Labour's plan to move from headline grades to a new system of school report cards as a "logical evolution". Does the Secretary of State agree with the chief inspector?

Gillian Keegan: I think the hon. Lady stood on a manifesto to abolish Ofsted in 2019, and now she has said she would remove the grading of schools. I too have a quotation from Sir Michael Wilshaw, who has said:

“This risks lowering standards in schools and is a distraction”.

I would go further, and say that this shows that Labour is happy to prioritise the asks of teaching unions over raising standards and safeguarding our children.

T2. [904521] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Has the Department had words with the Ministry of Defence about the siting of 2,000 illegal migrants on an RAF base? I ask that question because not 200 yards from where those illegal migrants are to be housed are a nursery school and a primary school, set in a community of 1,000 people in the former married quarters. Should not Ofsted and the Department be taking an interest in this matter, in the context of child protection?

Gillian Keegan: Of course we always take the interests of child protection very seriously. The Home Office has confirmed that the proposals for RAF Scampton are based on the accommodation of single adult males, so there will be no children there. We remain constantly in contact with both the Home Office and local councils as these proposals develop, and my focus is on promoting the wellbeing of all children, including those who are refugees.

Mr Speaker: I call SNP spokesperson Carol Monaghan.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): High-quality teaching is only possible when teachers feel valued and supported. The Scottish Government have engaged in constructive dialogue with teaching unions and agreed a pay deal for teachers with a 12% salary increase this month. Rather than hurl insults at dedicated teachers, when will this Government come up with a realistic pay offer for their committed teaching staff?

Gillian Keegan: I pay tribute to all our dedicated teachers. All of us across the House will agree that we cannot have a world-class education system without world-class teachers, and I am committed to making sure that we recruit and retain the best teachers. Obviously, we have had intensive talks with the unions and we offered them a one-off payment of £1,000 and an average of 4.5% for the period from September 2023 to 2024, when inflation is expected to be way below 2%. It is really disappointing that they have rejected that offer. It is also disappointing that they claim that it was not fully funded or affordable to schools, because we have confirmed that it is, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed that as well.

T3. [904522] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Department for Education has announced that it intends to subsidise the so-called Oak National Academy by £43 million in the coming years, much to the dismay of some of the educational software sector. Did the Department carry out a full assessment of the impact of that subsidy on competition and innovation in the sector before it made the decision, and if it did so, will it publish that study?

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): We believe that Oak can coexist with high-quality commercial publishers and that it will stimulate the market, helping teachers to become better informed consumers of resources. This country is one of the lowest users of commercial textbooks and our expectation is that Oak will increase the use of high-quality knowledge-rich textbooks in schools. The full business case for Oak, including the market impact, was published on gov.uk on 1 November.

T4. [904523] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The next Labour Government will recruit thousands of new teachers to ensure that every child has access to a broad curriculum that includes music, art, sports and drama. What is the Government's plan to increase pupil access to these vital subjects?

Nick Gibb: Of course we want children to have the benefit of a high-quality curriculum including music and the arts. We have a high uptake of arts GCSEs in our system, we have published the model music curriculum and we have a national plan for music education as well as a cultural plan for music education that is about to start its work.

T5. [904524] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Children across the country are returning to school today after the Easter break, but sadly, reports in Southend suggest that a fifth of school pupils are missing 10% of their lessons over the course of a year. Last December, a shocking 11.5% recorded unauthorised absences. I know that this is something that the Secretary of State takes really seriously, and given the life-transforming potential of education, could she update the House on her action plan to tackle unauthorised absences?

Nick Gibb: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; this is something that I take seriously, too. The Government remain committed to legislating to introduce statutory “children not in school” registers. On attendance, our priority is to reduce absence and to ensure consistent support for families, and we have published updated guidance setting out how we expect schools and local authorities to work together to improve attendance.

T8. [904527] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The number of children living in poverty is increasing, and a third of the children in my city are now experiencing food poverty. With commitments from the Mayor of London and the Welsh Government on implementing universal free school meals to fight the scourge of hunger, will the Minister work with me and Liverpool City Council on piloting the roll-out of universal free school meals for all primary and secondary pupils in our city? This would be a £13 million investment in our children's future and it would ensure that all children had the chance to fulfil their potential.

Nick Gibb: I am always happy to talk to the hon. Member about these issues. The Conservative Government since 2010 have extended free school meals to more groups of children than any other Government over the past century, and we have been able to do this because of our careful stewardship of the public finances and the economy. Some 1.9 million pupils are eligible for benefits-related free school meals, which is up from 1.7 million in 2021. That increase is due largely to the protections put in place on transfer to universal credit.

T6. [904525] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Following the recent public consultation by the Orbis Education Trust, will the Government confirm that it is now their intention for the proposed new Hanwood Park free school in Kettering to be open to both boys and girls?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's interest in ensuring that the new free school best meets the needs of pupils in his constituency, and indeed for his general interest in high-quality education in his constituency. The consultation closed on 5 March, and we are currently considering the outcome ahead of reaching a decision on the school's designation.

T9. [904528] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The latest Government data, released last Thursday, reports a 4.1% drop in apprenticeship starts compared with the 2021-22 academic year. I have a great deal of respect for the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, but is he sure he was right to claim in an earlier answer that apprenticeship starts rose this year?

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman to explain that, over the past year—2021-22—we increased apprenticeship starts by 8.6%, as I mentioned earlier.

T7. [904526] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): I was pleased to see a commitment in the SEND improvement plan to train up to 5,000 level 3-qualified special educational needs co-ordinators and teachers to ensure that children identified as having SEND can thrive in school. Does my hon. Friend agree that expanding this training and working to make it a mandatory part of all training for teachers and co-ordinators will improve the baseline assessments looking for SEND markers in those entering school.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): Early identification of SEND is vital, which is why we are training 5,000 early-years SENCOs and reforming initial teacher training and the early-career framework for teachers in later stages of education.

T10. [904529] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I recently surveyed all the schools in my Weaver Vale constituency, and over 50% of headteachers mentioned issues with the recruitment and retention of teaching and learning assistants, many of whom work with children with special educational needs. What are the Government doing to improve the pay and terms and conditions of teaching and learning assistants?

Nick Gibb: We are recruiting a record number of teachers, and we have a record number of teaching assistants in our schools. The Chancellor announced an extra £2 billion of school funding in the autumn statement, which means there has been a 15% increase in school funding in just two years.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Given the proven correlation between children having access to a good school library and their academic achievement and literacy, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that every primary school in Rother Valley and across the UK has a dedicated library or reading space?

Nick Gibb: We have spent £15 billion on capital since 2015, and it is up to schools how they allocate that capital. I share my hon. Friend's view that every school should have a school library, or at least a space in which children can sit and read.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): At the last Education questions, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education noted that he is very proud of the UK's intake of 600,000 international students every year. International students, as we know, inject billions into our economy, bring huge value to our campuses and enrich our wider society. Can he therefore confirm on the record that the Government will not introduce an illogical policy designed to restrict foreign students?

Robert Halfon: What I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman is that our target was 600,000 international students per year, we currently have 680,000—or just under—international students per year and that 600,000 annual target remains. Obviously, visas are a matter for the Home Office.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on music. Has the Minister considered replicating the success of the London BRIT School in Bradford?

Nick Gibb: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, this morning she, the Prime Minister and I visited the London Screen Academy in north London and saw some of its excellent facilities for 16 to 19-year-olds studying the technical side of film making. I understand why my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) is so passionate about this bid. All applications for new free schools are currently being assessed, with successful bids being announced before the summer.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I pay tribute to my constituent Ruth Perry, the former headteacher of Caversham Primary School. She was a much-loved member of our local community. Will the Secretary of State consider the very serious local concerns when she looks into this matter, and will she agree to meet me, local headteachers and Ruth's family to discuss this important issue?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and of course I would be happy to meet. This is a tragic case, and I send my heartfelt sympathies to Ruth Perry's family and friends, and all of the school community in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

NHS Strikes

3.35 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the impact of the junior doctors' strikes and what steps he is taking to prevent further strike action in the NHS.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. On its first part, we will not have firm figures on the number of patient appointments postponed until later today, because the NHS guidance has been to allow trusts a full working day to collate the data on those impacts. We do know from the previous three-day strike that 175,000 hospital appointments were disrupted and 28,000 staff were off. There is an initial estimate that 285,000 appointments and procedures would be rescheduled, but it is premature to set out the full impact of the junior doctors' strike before we have that data. I am happy to commit to providing an update for the House in a written statement tomorrow. In the coming days, I will also update the House on the very significant progress that has been made on the successful action taken over recent months to clear significant numbers of 78-week waits, which resulted from the covid pandemic.

It is regrettable that the British Medical Association junior doctors committee chose the period immediately after Easter in order to cause maximum disruption, extending its strike to 96 hours and asking its members not to inform hospitals as to whether they intended to strike, thus making contingency planning much more difficult. Let me put on record my huge thanks to all those NHS staff, including nurses and consultants, who stepped up to provide cover for patients last week.

I recognise that there are significant pressures on junior doctors, both from the period of the pandemic and from dealing with the backlogs that that has caused. I do want to see a deal that increases junior doctors' pay and fixes many of the non-pay frustrations that they articulate. But the junior doctors committee co-chairs have still not indicated that they will move substantially from their 35% pay demand, which is not affordable and indeed is not supported by those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Let me turn to the second part of the hon. Gentleman's question and the steps we are taking to prevent further strike action in the NHS. We have negotiated a deal with the NHS Staff Council; it is an offer we arrived at together, through constructive and meaningful negotiations. It is one on which people are still voting, with a decision of the NHS Staff Council due on 2 May. The largest union, Unison, has voted in favour of it, by a margin of 74% in favour. So we have agreed a process with the trade unions, which I am keen to respect, and we should now allow the other trade unions to complete their ballot, ahead of that NHS Staff Council meeting on 2 May.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Finally, the invisible man appears; the Secretary of State was largely absent last week during the most disruptive strikes in NHS history. He was almost as

invisible as the Prime Minister, who previously said he does not want to "get in the middle" of these disputes—what an abdication of leadership during a national crisis. An estimated 350,000 patients had appointments and operations cancelled last week—that is in addition to the hundreds of thousands already affected by previous rounds of action. Having failed to prevent nurses and ambulance workers from striking, the Government are repeating the same mistakes all over again by refusing talks with junior doctors. Patients cannot afford to lose more days to strikes. The NHS cannot afford more days lost to strike. Staff cannot afford more days lost to strikes. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to swallow his pride, admit that he has failed and bring in ACAS to mediate an end to the junior doctors' strike?

Last week also saw the Royal College of Nursing announce new strike dates with no derogations and a new ballot. What does the Secretary of State plan to do to avert the evident risks to patient safety? Government sources briefed yesterday that they are prepared to "tough it out". That is easy for them to say. Will the Secretary of State look cancer patients in the eye, while they wait for life-saving treatment, and tell them to tough it out, as they are the ones who will pay the price for his failed approach?

Finally, writing in *The Sun* on Sunday, the Secretary of State said that he is worried about patient safety, but he offered no plan to get this matter resolved. He is not a commentator; he is nominally the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care with the power and responsibility to put an end to these strikes. When will he put his toys back in the pram, stop blaming NHS staff, sit down with junior doctors and negotiate a fair resolution to this terrible, damaging and unprecedented dispute?

Steve Barclay: The shadow Secretary of State seems to ignore the fact that we have negotiated a deal with the NHS Staff Council, and it is a deal that it has recommended to its members. Indeed, the largest health union has voted in favour of the deal—indeed it is his own health union that has voted in favour of it—and yet he seems to suggest that we should tear it up even though other trade unions are voting on the offer, and their leadership had recommended it.

Secondly, the shadow Secretary of State says that we should sit down and negotiate. We have made an offer of 10.75% for last year, compared with the Labour Government in Wales, who have offered just 7.75%, which means that, in cash terms, the offer in England is higher than that put on the table by the Welsh Government, whom, I presume, he supports. He says that he does not support the junior doctors in their ask of 35%, and neither does the leadership there. We need to see meaningful movement from the junior doctors, but I recognise that they have been under significant pay and workforce pressures, which is why we want to sit down with them.

The bottom line is that the deal on the table is reasonable and fair. It means that just over £5,000 across last year and this year will be paid for a nurse at the top of band 5. The RCN recommended the deal to its members, but the deal was rejected by just under a third of its overall membership. It is hugely disappointing that the RCN has chosen not to wait for the other trade unions to complete their ballot and not to wait for the NHS Staff Council, of which it is a member, to meet to give its view on the deal. It has chosen to pre-empt all

that not only with the strikes that come before that decision of the NHS Staff Council, but by removing the derogations—the exemptions—that apply to key care, including emergency care, which is a risk to patient safety.

Trade unions are continuing to vote on the deal. The deal on the table is both fair and reasonable, including just over £5,000 across last year and this year for nurses at the top of band 5. The deal has been accepted by the largest union in the NHS, including, as I have said, the shadow Health Secretary's own trade union. It pays more in cash to Agenda for Change members than the deal on the table from the Labour Government in Wales. It is a deal that the majority of the NHS Staff Council, including the RCN's own leadership, recommended to its members. We have always worked in good faith to end the disruption that these strikes have caused and we will continue to do so. None the less, it is right to respect the agreement that we have reached with the NHS Staff Council and to await its decision, which is due in the coming weeks.

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

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Reports over the weekend suggest that the British Medical Association has asked its members not to engage with trusts if they intend to strike, as the Secretary of State has confirmed today. That is putting trust chief executives—and this is not their fault—in an impossible position. They are being asked to meet very challenging targets that we are rightly setting them, not least with respect to the covid backlog. What more can he do by his good offices to break that impasse? It is patients who are losing out.

Steve Barclay: I agree; it is extremely surprising that the BMA has asked its members not to liaise with NHS managers as they put in place those contingency plans. I urge the BMA junior doctors committee to think of those colleagues who have to provide the cover for those strikes. I reaffirm my thanks to all those staff in the NHS who provided cover following the Easter period, but it puts more pressure on other NHS staff if the BMA junior doctors committee is not willing for its members to liaise with management on sensible contingency measures, as I urge them to do.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The bigger dereliction of duty by the Secretary of State is not addressing the retention crisis among junior doctors, who have the choice of going to New Zealand or Australia, to be paid more than double what they receive now, or to move over to work as locums, where they will not carry the stress levels they currently do. What is he doing to address the retention crisis of junior doctors in the NHS?

Steve Barclay: In part, that is why my door is open and I am keen to discuss with junior doctors the pressure they face not just on pay, but on non-pay issues. There is the issue of support for the number of doctors and the workforce plan we have committed to bring forward to boost recruitment, but other non-pay issues are also frequently raised by junior doctors, such as booking annual leave and rostering. I am keen to work constructively with junior doctors to address those, but for us to do so they need to move from an unrealistic and unaffordable 35%, which the Leader of the Opposition himself has recognised is an unreasonable position.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to say that the pay offer that has been put on the table, notwithstanding the junior doctors, is fair and reasonable. What should drive all parties in this situation is putting patients first, moving forward to address the serious challenges of recovering from covid and seeking to address the issues within the NHS. Everyone should be focused on patients first as this situation moves to a resolution.

Steve Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend that this is a fair and reasonable settlement. As I say, it is more than £5,000 at band 5, and the NHS Staff Council has recommended it. The majority of trade unions, including the RCN, recommended this deal to their membership. That is why we should respect the NHS Staff Council process, respect the ballot that is still live and allow those votes to continue.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State seen the recent report on the BBC that billions of pounds—my words, not the BBC's—are being squandered on agency labour from private providers, with huge profits being generated? Is it right that one doctor alone received £5,200 for a single shift, as was reported by the BBC? What does the Secretary of State think the impact of that would be on his own staff? How can it be right for him to use bellicose language about the staff associations and unions while larding money into the pockets of the private agency providers?

Steve Barclay: One of the concerns at the moment is the BMA rate card, which is significantly increasing the cost of providing the required cover for the strikes, and in turn taking money away from things NHS staff have raised with me, such as improving our tech offer, improving the NHS estate and the many other priorities on which money could be spent. I am keen, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is, to bring down the cost of agency workers. That is why we have the commitment to the NHS workforce plan and why I am keen to sit down constructively with the junior doctors committee, in the same way that I did with the NHS Staff Council. After we reached our deal, the leader of those negotiations for the trade unions commented on the meaningful and constructive approach that we took with the Agenda for Change negotiations. We are keen to do the same with the junior doctors, but that has to be based on a reasonable opening position from them.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): When union bosses open their pay demands at 19% for nurses and 35% for junior doctors, is it any wonder that some ordinary members feel let down when they have been asked to settle for a generous and fair 5%? Would it not be far better if the BMA junior doctors committee revised its ludicrous demand for 35%, got around the table and did its members some service by negotiating for a fair and reasonable pay offer?

Steve Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend. The fact that even the Labour party does not support 35%—the Leader of the Opposition himself says that is not affordable—indicates how out of step the junior doctors committee co-chairs are on what is realistic to get the balance right in bringing down inflation and on the wider economic pressures we face. We stand ready to engage constructively

[Steve Barclay]

with the junior doctors committee but, as my hon. Friend says, that has to be on the basis of a meaningful opening position.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On 5 July, the British public will want to celebrate 75 years of our amazing NHS, but if they are still feeling the brunt of NHS strikes at that time, does the Secretary of State think it would still be right for him to be at the Dispatch Box?

Steve Barclay: We have agreed an offer with the Agenda for Change staff council. That is something that the staff council and the majority of trade unions have recommended to their own members, and that the largest health union has voted in favour of. I think we should allow that ballot to take place; it reflects meaningful and constructive engagement. That was reflected in the fact that trade union leaders themselves recommended the deal to their members. I hope that, when we come to the 75th anniversary, we can celebrate that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What actions are senior NHS managers taking to resolve non-pay issues for which they could offer better work experiences to doctors? What use can they make of flexibilities over pay increments, promotions and gradings so that good staff can be better rewarded?

Steve Barclay: As ever, my right hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. As part of the negotiation with the AfC staff council, a number of non-pay issues were discussed. Job evaluation is one such issue. Likewise, for junior doctors, areas such as e-rostering are extremely important. I share his desire for investment in technology, and to look at the time spent by clinicians that could be spent by others in the skills mix or through better use of artificial intelligence technology and a better estates programme. That is why it is important that we continue to have that funding, as well as reaching the offer that we have with the AfC staff council.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Nurses, junior doctors and paramedics do not take strike action lightly; it is a last resort after more than a decade of working harder and longer for less and less. The Secretary of State will say that there is no money for a fair pay deal, but that is not true: it can be paid for by taxing the richest and redistributing the wealth. Ending non-dom status would raise £3 billion; introducing a 1% tax on assets worth over £10 million would raise £10 billion; and equalising the capital gains and income tax rates would raise £14 billion. What do the Secretary of State and Conservative Members prefer: nurses having to use food banks, or taxing the richest and making them pay their fair share?

Steve Barclay: The odd thing is that the hon. Lady seems to be disagreeing with the trade union leadership, which is not her usual position. Unison described it as a “decisive outcome” when 74% of its members voted in favour of the deal. It is odd that she wants to deny the GMB and other trade unions the space to vote on what their leaders have recommended—the GMB leadership

has also recommended the deal to its members. Even the RCN leadership recommended the deal to its members. As Pat Cullen herself said:

“Negotiations work by compromise and agreement. We did not get everything and nor did the government. Ministers made improvements every day of those three weeks because we were able to say that returning to striking was the clear alternative. No union could enter negotiations and flatly say ‘no’ until you get everything you want. These talks will not be reopened if members reject this pay offer.”

The leadership of the RCN recommended the deal, as did the leaderships of the GMB and Unison. It is odd that the hon. Lady does not want to recognise that.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is ironic to hear the British Medical Association complain about staff shortages when it has in the past resisted the expansion of training places for doctors. When there have been disputes in the health service, those involved have always taken steps to ensure that lives were not endangered by the dispute. That appears to be no longer the case. That is, to my mind, a dereliction of professional duty. Will my right hon. Friend send the strong message to those involved that preserving life is a professional duty that must be maintained?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on patient safety and the duty that all involved have to safeguard it. Indeed, I have previously given the Royal College of Nursing’s leadership credit and praise for granting strike exemptions, known as derogations—notwithstanding our disputes, I was happy to recognise that on the record. Given that less than a third of the RCN’s total membership has voted against the deal, and that the RCN’s leadership recommended it, it is very odd that it has now hardened its position and removed those exemptions. I very much hope that it will reflect further on the matter in the coming days, because I think its previous stance of granting exemptions was right.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): We need to be clear: junior doctors have had a 26% real-terms pay cut. Restoring their pay would cost around £1 billion a year. That is less than half the giveaway handed to the super-rich through the non-dom tax avoidance scheme. Is it not the case that a proper pay rise for junior doctors is affordable—it is just that the Government have the wrong priorities?

Steve Barclay: It perhaps will not surprise the House to hear that the hon. Gentleman disagrees with his party’s leader on that, because the Leader of the Opposition says:

“I don’t think 35% is affordable”.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) is also wrong on the quantum, because the cost would be £2 billion, not £1 billion as he says. [Interruption.] Well, that has never been how departmental budgets operate—not when his party was in power, and certainly not now. He is wrong on the amount and wrong on the policy.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that the terms “emergency care” and “intensive care” imply that the life of those who need them is at risk, does my right hon. Friend share my dismay that people in that predicament are now clearly being targeted by strikers?

Will he—and hopefully his Opposition counterpart—represent to the medical unions that whatever other strike action they take, they should not endanger the life of people in emergency or intensive care?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Patient safety should come first for all parties in this dispute. That is why I urge the Royal College of Nursing to wait for the NHS Staff Council decision on the offer. Voting is still ongoing, and it would be premature to announce strike action ahead of that decision.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Nurses and junior doctors are being pushed to breaking point, because there simply are not enough of them, and the Government have failed to plan the workforce properly. A nurse I spoke to at the weekend told of the terrible queues in corridors, and said that patients were waiting in pain, and not in the dignified environment that they should be in. She also spoke of the lack of care packages to enable the safe discharge of many patients. Why are we still waiting for the NHS workforce plan, which the Government promised? Can the Secretary of State tell us on what date we can expect to hear a statement on it? Also, what urgent action will he take to address the social care crisis?

Steve Barclay: On social care, which relates to the hon. Lady's point about discharge, she will recall that in the autumn statement the Chancellor put additional funding into adult social care—funding of up to £7.5 billion over two years, which is the largest ever increase in funding for social care. Also, I announced at the Dispatch Box in early January a reprioritisation of funding in the Department—it was a £250-million package—in the light of urgent and emergency care pressure. That included funding to support greater discharge, to get more flow. I touched on the workforce plan earlier. We will publish it shortly; in the autumn statement, the Chancellor committed to doing so.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the BMA pay demands are over four times the average private sector pay increase and that, were the Government to agree to them, they would place a huge additional tax burden on hard-working taxpayers across the country—including in Southend West—at just the time when they are battling with an unprecedented cost of living crisis?

Steve Barclay: I do agree with my hon. Friend. If that demand were agreed to, it would mean some junior doctors receiving a pay rise of over £20,000. We need to find a balance, with a fair and reasonable settlement for NHS staff, recognising the huge pressure from the pandemic and the backlogs it has caused, while at the same time bringing inflation down, because that matters not just to NHS staff, but to all working people who are impacted by inflation.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The BMA has made it crystal clear that it is willing to enter into negotiations, so will the Secretary of State commit right now to asking ACAS to negotiate and mediate? If not, why not?

Steve Barclay: As I have said, we need to see meaningful movement from the BMA. The 35% demand that it has set out is not affordable, which is a point that is recognised by most colleagues across the House—certainly, Opposition Front Benchers recognise it. We need to see significant movement from the BMA to be able to have constructive and meaningful engagement.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgement that junior doctors deserve a pay rise, and not just because my wife is a junior doctor, and his focus on non-pay issues. For all the talk about ACAS from Opposition Members, is it not the case that so long as the BMA leadership maintain that their starting point is 35%, there is no point in going to ACAS, because the BMA is not prepared to negotiate? It is setting its face against the interests of doctors and patients. The only way to get through this is to get around the table with a meaningful starting point, and that cannot be 35%, as the Leader of the Opposition has said.

Steve Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and he is right to highlight the wider issues that we want to discuss. The previous negotiation with the junior doctors included, for example, setting up a higher pay band, which has meant that there has been a cumulative increase of over 24% over four years. It included targeted action such as a £1,000 a year allowance for junior doctors who work less than full time, and targeted action around unsocial hours and weekend work. Those are the meaningful discussions that we want to enter into with junior doctors, but that has to be on the basis of a realistic and deliverable discussion, and 35% is not that.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am not sure the Secretary of State understands just how angry people are. My constituents are absolutely furious with the Government's stewardship of the NHS. Hull is the most under-doctored area in the country; we have the longest waits in A&E in the country; and we have had a very poor Care Quality Commission report on our local hospitals. On the junior doctor strikes, when will the Secretary of State start to put patients first? I want to make sure that he goes away from this Chamber and gets ACAS involved, so that we can get the junior doctors back at work, with no further delays and cancellations for my constituents and patients in Hull.

Steve Barclay: The rather odd thing is that we have a larger cash offer on the table for 2022-23 than the Labour Government in Wales, and we have reduced our longest waits far more than they have in Wales. We have a deal that the trade union leaders themselves have recommended, that the majority of staff councils have recommended and that the largest health union has voted emphatically in support of. It is right that we allow time for that deal to go through, and we stand ready to have similar meaningful and constructive engagement with the junior doctors once they move from what is an unrealistic position.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Regulars in this Chamber will know that Opposition Members have habitually taken to urging Ministers to adopt their

[*Sir Desmond Swayne*]

own policies. Does the Secretary of State share my difficulty that, in respect of this urgent question, none of us has any idea what their policy is?

Steve Barclay: In short, the position of the shadow Health Secretary seems to be to deny the vote of his own union, Unison, which voted 74% in favour; to not wait for the NHS staff council to reach its decision; and to unravel to some extent what has been meaningful and constructive engagement with the “Agenda for Change” staff council. My right hon. Friend is right to be confused about the Opposition’s actual position.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I can see at least two other Members in the Chamber who know from personal experience that early diagnosis and treatment of cancer can save lives. I very much hope that any action taken over the next few weeks will not affect that, because that could mean people losing their lives before their time.

I have two significant worries about the long-term future of the NHS. One is seeing so many people, including those from poor constituencies and poor families, using all their life savings to buy an operation, because they know that that is their only means of getting back to work as there is such a long backlog. That feels like a form of privatising the NHS.

Secondly, there are terrible problems with recruitment and retention, with more than 110,000 vacancies in the NHS. I really hope we will see the workforce paper soon. It has been promised for a very long time, and I suspect “summer” may go on until autumn—it tends to every year, I suppose. It would be good to see that paper soon, because there are so many different parts of the NHS where we need to recruit more people. Everybody in this round is worrying, “Will the NHS be worth working for in 10, 15 or 20 years’ time?”. We can only do this if there is real confidence in the future.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman makes two important points. The workforce plan is critical, and I have referred to that already. He also raises the importance of early diagnosis of cancer, and he is absolutely right on that. He will have seen that the faster diagnosis standard was met in the latest operational performance data for February, which was extremely welcome news. There is obviously more still to do. That is why we are rolling out the programme of diagnostic centres and surgical hubs. We are redesigning patient pathways to streamline those journeys, and we are looking at variation in performance on such things as faecal immunochemical tests. There is a huge amount of work, but I hope he can see some progress in the latest figures.

More widely in terms of elective recovery, we made progress in the summer on the two-year waits, in stark contrast to Wales, which was significantly above 50,000. We got it under 2,000 in the summer. I will update the House shortly on the 78-week waits. We are working through the key actions in our elective recovery plan as we deal with the consequences of the build-up from the pandemic.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): We all recognise how hard junior doctors work, but if we are to have successful negotiations, we need honesty and

integrity in them. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that the BMA’s figure—its central campaign claim—of £14-an-hour pay for junior doctors has been shown to be misleading?

Steve Barclay: I do share my hon. Friend’s concern. Full Fact has shown that the figure is inaccurate. It disregards higher pay later in the evenings and at weekends. It ignores the 20% that goes into pensions and that junior doctors, probably more than any other profession, have very quick pay and career progression. That is why, as part of our listening exercise, we made changes to pensions in the Budget. That was a reflection of the fact that senior doctors have often accumulated those pension pots, which is one of the other challenges we are dealing with. It is an indication of the career and pay progression that many junior doctors will see later in their careers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his endeavours to find a pay settlement, ever mindful that it is more than pay that some NHS staff wish to see. To give an example of that, I recently sat listening to one of my constituents who is in foundation year 1. She was brought to tears by the stress and pressure on her young shoulders. When she finally finishes shifts, she lies awake going over the decisions made. In her view, she would keep her pay the same to have more qualified staff available. How will the Secretary of State’s proposals make adequate support on the wards possible?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and there is a lot more we can do around the skills mix in the NHS and ensuring that people operate at what is referred to as the top of their licence and make the maximum of the training they have. Often there are restrictions in place. We are looking at physician associates and medical examiners and at the role of pharmacists within primary care, as well as at how we get the right continuing professional development to train people, so that we get more of the career ladder from different roles.

There is a lot that we are looking at, in the context of the workforce plan, around the right skills mix, the right training and job evaluation. That was one of the issues in my discussions with the staff council—for example, there was a particular focus on apprenticeships. Sometimes people take a pay hit when they go into an apprenticeship if they were at the top of their previous band. That is one of the things we agreed to work on with the staff council. Again, I am sure that an area of consensus in the House will be that apprenticeships offer great opportunities for people to progress, and we should not have a financial penalty when people pursue them.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Many hon. Members have raised extremely important points, but the central issue is that the reckless and irresponsible actions of two trade unions are putting the lives of my constituents and people throughout the country at risk. The right to strike can never trump people’s right to receive healthcare and not have their life threatened by the actions of left-wing trade unions. Can I ask what my right hon. Friend is going to do to address this issue and to hold trade unions to account if they continue with this appalling behaviour?

Steve Barclay: I share my hon. Friend's concern. We have worked constructively with the Royal College of Nursing and, as I say, I was happy to put on the record my acknowledgment of the exemptions it had previously granted. I hope that between now and the end of the month, it will further reflect on the fact that the 48 hours of continuous strike action will happen without consultation with other staff council members and without waiting for the decision of other trade unions that are currently balloting. He will know that "Agenda for Change" is a deal that covers all the trade unions, not just the RCN in isolation, and I think it is right to wait for all the trade unions to vote and for the staff council to meet.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I draw the attention of Members of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

On Friday, I was working at the hospital and my usual clinic had cancelled all but one patient. I spoke to the secretaries about the various cancellations they had had to make as result of the strikes, and I was really sad to hear not only that they had often been verbally abused by people who were upset, but that they have had to cancel some patients on two occasions because of the earlier strikes and the more recent ones. I was also sad to hear that we are looking at further strikes in the next few weeks.

Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the members of staff who came into work, who did not strike and who continue to deliver a very important and valuable service? What is he doing to expedite the legislation on minimum service guarantees, so that we do not have any implications from strikes on emergency and intensive care in particular?

Steve Barclay: First, I thank my hon. Friend for her service and for the work she was doing on Friday. I join her in putting on the record my thanks to all those staff who did provide cover, as I said in my opening remarks. She is right to highlight the minimum service legislation, and we will obviously need to reflect on recent events in that context. She also points to the fact that the decision by the BMA junior doctors committee to advise members not to notify hospital management about whether they were striking obviously made it more likely that clinics would be cancelled, even when it then transpired that doctors could have provided cover. That is clearly regrettable and indicates the need for resolution, and we want to work constructively with the junior doctors on this.

Vladimir Kara-Murza

4.13 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the trial of Vladimir Kara-Murza.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this urgent question. I share her concerns about the case of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian opposition politician, journalist and activist, and a British national, who has today been sentenced on clearly politically motivated charges and faces 25 years in prison. His detention is yet another example of Russia's efforts to shut down dissent over the war in Ukraine and to silence opposition voices.

I pay tribute to Mr Kara-Murza, a champion for human rights who has shown immense courage in speaking out against the aggression of the Russian state. I also want to recognise his wife Evgenia and commend her for her tireless efforts to promote her husband's cause.

Mr Kara-Murza has on numerous occasions, both in Russia and abroad, set out the facts of Russia's military actions in Ukraine, an invasion witnessed by the whole world. He has now been convicted of spreading false information about the Russian armed forces and of participating in the activities of an undesirable organisation. On top of this, he is further convicted of high treason. The charges brought against him are symptomatic of the Russian state's repression and blatant censorship of anyone who dares criticise it.

Mr Kara-Murza is one of over 500 individuals arrested by the Russian authorities for criticising the war in Ukraine. The repression of opposition voices and of those condemning Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine is a glaring attempt to control discourse on the matter. His Majesty's Government condemn the politically motivated sentencing of Mr Kara-Murza and of all those who speak out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I echo the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe in continuing to call for his release.

Politically, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to pressure Russia to release Mr Kara-Murza. Since his initial arrest in April last year, we have continued to condemn publicly his politically motivated detention and to call for his release. We have raised Mr Kara-Murza's case repeatedly both with the Russians directly and in international fora, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations. Today, Foreign Office senior officials have summoned the Russian ambassador. They will make it clear that the UK considers Mr Kara-Murza's detention to be contrary to Russia's international obligations on human rights.

Mr Kara-Murza's welfare remains a priority for the Foreign Office and we continue to push for consular access. Diplomatic officials at the British embassy in Moscow have repeatedly attended the court building and, where permitted, the courtroom. His Majesty's ambassador was present at the court today when the verdict was given and delivered a statement to Russian media and spectators.

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

Consular officials remain in contact with Mr Kara-Murza's family and their lawyer to ensure that our actions remain aligned with his wishes. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) that we will continue to raise Mr Kara-Murza's case at every appropriate moment and to call for his release.

Alicia Kearns: I am disappointed that an urgent question was required today when clearly a statement was in order, but I welcome the fact that the Government have called in the Russian ambassador.

We should be very clear that the sentencing of Vladimir Kara-Murza is a farce. His crime was speaking out against Putin's war crimes in Ukraine and we should pay homage to his courage in returning to Russia after the renewed illegal invasion to make sure those who do not support Putin's actions were heard and to marshal those efforts against it.

It is only two weeks since the Foreign Affairs Committee released our report on state hostage taking entitled "Stolen years". In it, we made it very clear that, should a British national be arbitrarily detained and sentenced, it is vital that the British Government speak as loudly as they can to ensure these individuals are kept as safe as possible.

So my ask today of the Government is as follows. First, will they set out in more detail how they are working to secure Mr Kara-Murza's release? They have recognised this is arbitrary—we should therefore be working to get him out. Secondly, how are we demanding that he gets the medical care he deserves? Under Russian law, the condition he has as a result of the two failed poisonings against him should mean he cannot be held in a Russian prison—so under Russian law he should not be being held. Thirdly, will we sanction the 29 individuals responsible for him being held—not the two already sanctioned because of Magnitsky and their efforts to help murder him, but the 29 responsible for Kara-Murza being held? Finally, will the Minister call for all British nationals to return home? It is not safe any more to remain in Russia.

I put on record that this House feels very strongly about the way in which British nationals are having their nationality weaponised against them. Today the hearts of all in the House go out to Vladimir and his family. We hope the Government will show the same commitment that those on the Back Benches have to get him home.

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for the trenchant way she spoke on behalf of the whole House. The Government agree with pretty much everything she said.

The trial was conducted behind closed doors. No diplomats or observers were allowed in. The defence was not allowed proper time to prepare and was refused permission to examine witnesses. My hon. Friend asks about the action we are taking. The Russian ambassador has been summoned to the Foreign Office and is expected to arrive shortly. We will be looking specifically at the issue of the healthcare and medicine that is available. As she said, Mr Kara-Murza was poisoned in 2015 and 2017. We also summoned the ambassador on 6 April and a note verbale—our third—has gone out today, which seeks consular access.

On sanctions, I make it clear to my hon. Friend that, under the Magnitsky propositions, we have already sanctioned both the judge and the jailer because of their involvement in that case, and I have instructed officials to investigate the possibility of sanctioning everyone who was involved in the trial. We expect, within the next week, to come forward with a package of further measures in that respect.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for submitting this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

We are deeply disturbed and horrified by the sentencing today of Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison. His only fault appears to be having had the bravery and courage to speak the truth about Putin's criminal regime and the illegal and barbarous war against the people of Ukraine. The actions we have seen today are simply those of a regime that fears that its own people will come to learn the truth about their Government's actions.

I too met Evgenia Kara-Murza recently and was overwhelmed by the incredible resolve of both her and her husband. She told *The Sunday Times* this weekend that she was "baffled" by the UK Government's apparent lack of support. My greatest sympathies are with her and her brave family today. We have particular responsibilities to Vladimir, as a dual British citizen, yet his family apparently do not feel that has been provided. Indeed, Bill Browder described the Government as "negligent" in dealing with his situation. Vladimir is a patriot who has worked relentlessly, at great personal risk, for a democratic Russia free of the tyranny extolled by Putin and his regime of criminals. The actions of the Government in the coming days will be critical in securing his safety and wellbeing.

I have three questions. First, at least 31 Russian officials have been directly involved in the false prosecution and imprisonment of Vladimir. Can the Minister tell the House or publish a full list of how many of them have actually been sanctioned? The Canadians and the Americans appear to have sanctioned all those responsible. Have we done so? If not, why not? Secondly, he spoke about Vladimir's wellbeing. There have been attempts to poison him twice. Those involved in his incarceration have a dark record and there is a real risk to his health. What assurances have we received? Lastly, how many times did Ministers raise the case publicly or privately? I was deeply concerned that, before the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), did not even appear to be briefed on the case when answering questions from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). What consular support has Vladimir been permitted or provided with? Have the Foreign Secretary or Ministers spoken to his family today or in the last week?

We stand firmly alongside Vladimir and all those who seek a free and democratic Russia, and who expose the truth of Putin's barbarous regime.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I believe the Government have been extremely strongly supportive during this appalling trial and the

events that have taken place. He asks me about the 31 officials involved in the trial and what steps the Government are going to take, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). As I have told him, I have instructed officials to investigate the possibility of sanctioning everyone involved in the trial. We will report back on that in due time.

The hon. Gentleman asks for an assurance on Vladimir Kara-Murza's health and mentions the two previous poisonings, in 2015 and 2017. The ambassador has been summoned—he should be arriving at the Foreign Office any moment—and the issue of Vladimir Kara-Murza's health will be right at the top of the agenda.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield, and his appearance in front of the FAC. I should make it clear that he is not the Minister responsible for this specific matter. The Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), is very much seized of all the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Vladimir Kara-Murza is a former journalist and one of 22 journalists currently imprisoned in Russia, including Evan Gershkovich of *The Wall Street Journal*. Can he update the House on the efforts being made to obtain the release of Mr Gershkovich, and will he look at introducing targeted sanctions on all those involved in the persecution of journalists in Russia?

Mr Mitchell: As my right hon. Friend will know, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the British Government have been heavily involved in taking action through a variety of different means, including conferences to try to protect the rights of a free press and journalists around the world. On the case that he raised, I will write to him imminently to give him an up-to-date answer, and I will make the letter available to the House. On his overall point, we seek every way we can to stand up for a free press and open journalism, and to bear down on states that do not respect the important role that a free press play.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Let's face it: Russia does not have a criminal justice system of any kind; it has a cruel and arbitrary punishment scheme for those who disagree with Vladimir Putin. As with Khodorkovsky and Alexei Navalny, it is probably Putin's intention that Vladimir Kara-Murza dies in prison. We need to do everything in our power to ensure that that does not come to pass, including making sure that Putin does not win in Ukraine.

I worry about the Government's reaction because, in November last year, the Europe Minister, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), said in a written parliamentary answer that the Government had already looked at the sanctions that Canada introduced in this respect, but they still have not done anything. Months have passed and only now does the Minister come to the Dispatch Box to say that he has told Ministers to start looking at it. That is not good enough. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), to whom he

referred earlier, is the consular Minister—surely, every single Government Minister should know each and every one of these cases when they appear in public, as they are at the top of our list. Much as I like the Minister who is at the Dispatch Box, as he knows perfectly well, we all just want the Government to put some welly into this issue, and not always wait until the Russians make the first move.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman slightly over-chides my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. What the hon. Gentleman said about the trial was absolutely correct—I set out in my first response the key points where natural justice was clearly totally denied. He is quite right about that. He asked about the danger that Kara-Murza will die in detention. Clearly, that is very real, which is why the ambassador was summoned on 6 April and is being summoned again today. At today's meeting, the issue of his health will be specifically addressed.

On the issue of consular relations, let me make it clear to the House that under the Vienna convention on consular relations, there is no clear policy on dual nationals and on which takes precedence. There is a bilateral agreement from 1965 between the Soviet Union and the UK that talks about nationality being determined by the sending state. We are looking to see whether there is any extra leverage that we can gain through international law to pursue the point that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): My right hon. Friend talks about seeking out and sanctioning the individual officials, but this is an action of the Russian state, not of individuals. Since the Ukraine war, just the major countries in Europe have expelled between 27 and 45 diplomats each. Is that not a measure that we should look at?

Mr Mitchell: As ever on these matters, my right hon. Friend makes an interesting and important point. We have to balance the national interest in how we pursue our diplomacy, and we keep these matters under review. In view of his comment, I will take another look at the issue that he has raised.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): There is a lot of agreement across the House that Mr Kara-Murza is a hero and deserves our support. He is not the only person languishing in one of Vladimir Putin's jails under trumped-up charges—Russia does not have a judicial system that is worthy of international respect or credibility—but he is a British citizen, which means the UK Government have specific obligations to him. I hope the Minister takes the criticism as constructive—the House expects to see more action going forward and more support than his family think he has received.

Hopefully, I will make two constructive suggestions. Mr Kara-Murza was instrumental in the creation of the Magnitsky sanctions regime in the United States, so it would surely be a fitting tribute to use that architecture to target the people who have persecuted him. I appreciate the Minister will not speculate on future sanctions, but he will have universal support if they happen in due course.

[Alyn Smith]

On Russia's involvement in international organisations, this issue cannot pass without consequence. I participated in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe parliamentary assembly in Vienna recently, where the Russian delegation made a mockery of proceedings. We need to be more vocal in our opposition to Russia's participation in and abuse of the international legal order, because it is clear we are dealing with a pariah state and a pariah regime that should be treated as such.

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the points he raised early in his contribution, we will look at everything. Of course, the Magnitsky legislation, which many of us were heavily involved in getting through the House, is a very significant piece on the board, which we should always use whenever we can.

In respect of removing Russia from the credible international architecture, which the hon. Gentleman suggested, we led the move to remove Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council, so he may rest assured that we are alert to such opportunities.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): A few years ago, people saw no continuity between the cold war Soviet Union and present-day Russia, but what would one expect from a state run by a KGB gangster like Putin? I remind the House of the memoirs of a man called Anatoly Marchenko—"My Testimony", published in 1969—who died in a Soviet jail in 1986. He, like Navalny and Kara-Murza, exposed himself to indefinite imprisonment to show up the nature of the then Soviet state. Can we, at least, stop downplaying Russia as an "authoritarian" regime, and instead speak the truth and say that it remains a totalitarian state, run by a KGB gangster?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend brings to bear considerable experience of these matters. He speaks with great wisdom. What he says about Anatoly Marchenko, who died in 1986, is absolutely right. We should all pay tribute to the extraordinarily brave people in repressive regimes who stand up for human rights and justice, on behalf of themselves and their fellow citizens.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I first became aware of Vladimir Kara-Murza when I was the director of the British Council in St Petersburg, from 2005 to 2008. Since I came to this place, I have got to know him and I am truly honoured to call him a friend. The last time I met him here in Parliament, I begged him not to go back to Russia, but he said to me, "Stephen, I'm a patriot. I believe that my country will, one day, be free, and I have to campaign and fight for the values that we hold dear." Of course, we know what has happened since then, but I believe that his voice will continue to influence and build a better future for Russia, Ukraine and beyond.

I am baffled by the fact that, although Kara-Murza is a British citizen, it is countries such as the United States, Canada and Latvia that have stepped up to the plate and sanctioned the 29 officials involved in the monstrous persecution of Vladimir, yet the UK Government have sat on their hands. Will the Minister try to shed some light on why that it is? Why, when a

British citizen is languishing in a jail in Russia, have other countries taken action on sanctions but our Government have not?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the early part of his question. His personal knowledge—and not his alone—of Mr Kara-Murza has clearly percolated across the House. Mr Kara-Murza's bravery, courage and determination are an inspiration to us all. It is clear that his voice will continue to influence us greatly, as the hon. Gentleman says.

On sanctions, I really cannot add anything to what I have said, which is that officials are looking at the possibility of sanctioning everyone involved in the trial. We will report back in due course when we have determined whether that is possible.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), I regard Vladimir Kara-Murza as a friend; we have had him here on a number of occasions to speak to the Council of Europe delegation. This is a travesty of human rights. As Russia is no longer part of the Council of Europe and no longer under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, how will we ensure that our view of human rights applies in this case?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of the Council of Europe; I congratulate him and his colleagues on the work that the Council of Europe has done on this case. I can assure him that we will do everything we can to ensure that Mr Kara-Murza is freed as swiftly as possible. Together with our international allies and like-minded nations, we will do everything we can to bear down on Mr Kara-Murza's case and on the other cases that so disfigure the reputation of Russia.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As is often the case on these issues, this House is clearly speaking with one voice—not only in utter condemnation of what has happened to Vladimir Kara-Murza, but in frustration that the Government could, and possibly should, have acted earlier.

Mr Kara-Murza is a member of the Lib Dems' sister party Yabloko, some of whose activists I spoke to this morning. They are desperately concerned about his physical condition and are worried that he will die in detention. We need to take that concern seriously. They also say that he is not an enemy of Russia; he is a person who wants people to live better and in freedom. I was disheartened to hear that some of those activists are now considering going into hiding, thereby removing the last opposition party in Russia. Will the Minister join me in expressing solidarity with all those brave activists who have worked with Mr Kara-Murza?

Will the Minister also give us a timeframe for reporting back to this House on sanctions? It is long past time, and I hope that the frustration of the House is clear.

Mr Mitchell: In answer to the hon. Lady's final point, we will report back as soon as we are able to do so in the normal way. I completely understand her frustration, which we all share. She is quite right to say that Mr Kara-Murza is not an enemy of Russia: he is standing up for freedom, democracy and peace in Russia, and we are all determined that his voice will be heard.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Following the shocking sentencing of Vladimir Kara-Murza in Russia, which pretended to be a judicial process but frankly looked more like a circus act, will my right hon. Friend confirm not only that the 29 people who have been involved so far will be looked at, but that any prison guard, warder, doctor or Russian civil servant who causes harm to Mr Kara-Murza before his release will be subject to harsh sanctions?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is a distinguished lawyer and the whole House will have heard his analysis of the bogus trial that has taken place. In respect of sanctioning, we will look at every possible opportunity in the way I described earlier.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. The UK Government's press release in response to today's sentencing of Mr Kara-Murza mentions the investigative work of the UN Human Rights Council's rapporteur on internal oppression in Russia. Will the Minister update the House on the work of the rapporteur, on the UK Government's engagement with the rapporteur and on what he hopes the outcome of the rapporteur's work will be?

Mr Mitchell: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that we are a leading member of the United Nations, we look very carefully at the work in which the Human Rights Council is engaged all the time, and when there is anything to say we will of course report it. The hon. Gentleman may rest assured that through that avenue we are exerting every pressure that we can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. I think it vital for the message of a united voice from Members in all parts of the Chamber to be sent today. Perhaps we cannot always change things in the way we would like to, but I think it important for the House to voice its opinion democratically, and I am pleased that the Minister has done so this afternoon.

The sentence handed to Vladimir Kara-Murza is a sign that the Russian authorities are determined to silence critics of Putin's regime and eliminate any threats to their system. We must, I believe, do all that we can to come together, and, more important, protect those who expose the criminality of the Russian Government. What steps will the Minister take to work with counterparts in western states to ensure that we safeguard those who are being faced with the brutality of the Russian state?

Mr Mitchell: As usual, the hon. Gentleman speaks with both wisdom and concern. Of course we will seek every way possible to protect whistleblowers. As for his question about our working with others, he may rest assured that we will take every possible step to prosecute the important issues about which he and I care so much.

CPTPP: Conclusion of Negotiations

4.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the progress of negotiations for us to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

I am delighted to announce that since we first launched consultations in 2018, and after nearly two years of talks, the UK has substantially concluded negotiations to accede to the CPTPP. We will become the first country to join since the original partnership was founded. I am also pleased to tell the House that we are delivering on our post-Brexit agenda for a modern, free-trading global Britain, and that this agreement represents the future of global trade. Our negotiators have spent 21 months working painstakingly, and often through the night, to secure the best deal for the UK, and that is what they have done. This is an outstanding deal for our country, giving access to a fast-growing economic bloc that will allow us to sell our goods and services without giving up control of our laws.

Before I continue my statement, let me thank former Secretaries of State for International Trade. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who developed this strategy and without whom today would not have been possible. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who first appointed me as Trade Secretary, and who launched the negotiations and ensured throughout her tenure that this was a deal that would be delivered. I thank the present Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), for her support and invaluable advice. I also thank my current and former Trade Ministers.

I am told that Their Excellencies the Japanese and Vietnamese ambassadors are with us today. It should not go without saying that both countries were extremely supportive of our accession. I thank the ambassadors and their countries, and the various negotiators and working groups, for everything that they did to help the UK to accede today.

The CPTPP will act as a gateway to the Indo-Pacific, one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing regions on Earth. The Indo-Pacific is expected to account for the majority of global growth by 2050. The CPTPP will grow nearly 40% faster than the EU over the next three decades, and membership of the bloc will enhance access to a market of more than 500 million consumers for the UK's goods and services. That is why I described the CPTPP as representing the future of global trade. The brilliant terms that we have secured mean that British businesses will be able to target these dynamic economies, which will account for 15% of global GDP once the UK has joined. As the partnership grows, so will its role in shaping the rules of global trade. This alliance will help us to confront growing protectionism and unfair trading practices, putting us in a stronger position to withstand global shocks.

British businesses will enjoy new opportunities as part of the CPTPP. For instance, 99% of current UK goods exports to its members will be eligible for tariff-free trade, new tariff reductions with countries such as

[Kemi Badenoch]

Mexico and Canada will boost export opportunities, and a new free-trade deal with Malaysia will open up a £330 billion economy to the UK.

We will benefit from reduced red tape and simplified customs procedures across the bloc, and from modern rules of origin that offer British businesses new export opportunities and could help support UK efforts to diversify critical supply chains. We have all seen what can happen to supply chains when economic shocks happen. This global flexibility with like-minded partners will help British firms to become more resilient and protect economic security. For supply chains, this partnership is the future of global trade.

As a Minister who represents a rural constituency, I understand the concerns farmers may have about trade agreements because they have told me about them many times, so I know that Members representing agricultural communities will be delighted with the opportunities the CPTPP presents. I would like to put on record my thanks to the President of the National Farmers Union, Minette Batters, for recognising the opportunity to, as she puts it,

“get more fantastic British food on plates overseas”.

As the world’s demand for meat and dairy changes, having better access to growing and dynamic economies in other parts of the globe will protect British farmers and food producers into the future.

Our farmers will benefit from increased market access on these products, including through tariff free exports to Mexico for beef, pork and poultry and new zero-tariff access to Canada’s butter and cream market, which we did not have under our existing EU roll-over agreement. Our cheesemakers will have new market access to additional shared quotas, equating to about 7.5 times the amount we currently export to Canada, and our distillers will benefit from the elimination of tariffs of around 80% on UK whisky to Malaysia within 10 years. So for food and drinks exports, the partnership represents the future of global trade.

The UK is already a services superpower. Our digital, financial and legal services, among many others, are the envy of the world. This world-leading agreement will help them to grow further still. In future, a British firm will be able to operate on a par with a Vietnamese one without setting up a Hanoi branch. British firms will face less red tape in doing trade and business travel will become smoother and easier. For the modern services and tech economy, the partnership represents the future of global trade.

As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, no trade agreement comes without a quid pro quo, but we have taken our time to get this deal right for the UK and we never compromise on food quality or animal welfare standards. Joining CPTPP is no different. We will not have to change our standards to join, including on chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-fed beef, as many detractors would like to have the British public believe. We have also made sure that our high environment and labour standards are protected, so the CPTPP agreement includes comprehensive chapters for environmental protections, anti-corruption and improving workers’ rights. We have secured appropriate protections for the

UK producers, reducing import tariffs in a manner proportionate to the market access we have received, and maintaining protections where needed.

Membership will enable us to shape the future of the agreement, including its future membership, and it will increase our influence and that of the wider bloc in setting the rules of the global economy. CPTPP shows how sovereign countries can uphold high standards without being subject to foreign court rulings or membership fees.

Parliament will rightly want ample opportunity to scrutinise this deal before ratification. My Department will follow the process set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. Parliament will also have the opportunity to scrutinise any implementing legislation, as was the case with the recent Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Act 2023. The people of this country have voted for the future of global trade, not the past. On goods, on services, on supply chains, on growth and on rules-based trade without ceding sovereignty or losing control of our borders, this agreement lives up to that instruction. We are securing a place for the UK in the future of global trade, and I commend this statement to the House.

4.48 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am of course grateful to the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of her statement, but having listened, the detail is paper thin. The published negotiating strategy from the UK Government was limited and even the policy paper that was published alongside the announcement on 31 March is very general indeed. The Secretary of State herself has been on the airwaves questioning the projections of her own Department that this offers 0.08% to our GDP. And while there has finally been progress in the CPTPP accession talks, this does not make up for the failure to deliver the India trade deal, or indeed the US trade deal, promised by the end of last year. Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us when that US deal might be completed, given that negotiations are now not expected even to begin until 2025.

We on the Labour Benches are pro-trade, pro-business and pro-worker. Accessing new markets is essential, and it is particularly welcome because of the Government’s dreadful record on trade. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that UK exports are due to fall by 6.6% this year, which is a more than £51 billion hit to the UK economy. That will only further impact on our public services, which are already under incredible pressure, and make the cost of living crisis even worse.

What exactly Ministers have agreed to in these accession talks will need to be scrutinised carefully, because I have watched Ministers come into this Chamber to laud trade deals, only to criticise them when they leave office or, in the Prime Minister’s case, when they are temporarily out of office—he said the Australia deal is “one-sided.”

This announcement was slipped out on the last day before recess. Of course it is great that the Secretary of State is here, but answers are needed. First, other countries that have joined CPTPP have secured important safeguards and support for their producers. It is vital that Ministers set out the details of what they have negotiated. In her statement, the Secretary of State mentioned that all trade deals involve a quid pro quo, but she did not say what the quid pro quo is in respect of CPTPP.

Specifically, New Zealand put in place side letters with all the other signatories to opt out of the investor-state dispute settlement mechanism, which could give investors from abroad the right to sue the Government for choosing to regulate in a particular area. The Government seem to have excluded ISDS with Australia and New Zealand, but not with the other countries. Why have they done that, and what assurance can the Secretary of State give that the Government can legislate in the interests of the British people without the threat of being sued under this mechanism?

The Secretary of State mentioned maintaining certain protections for agriculture, but can she be more specific? What particular support will the Government offer to the agricultural sector and when, particularly given the strong feeling that Ministers sold out our farmers to get the Australia deal over the line? Have specific conditions been put in place to address concerns about the importation of palm oil, which has been linked to deforestation?

The Secretary of State did not even mention the devolved Governments in her statement. What engagement does she propose to have with them? What detailed assurances can the Government provide that the CPTPP agreement will not undermine the Windsor framework?

The Secretary of State also mentioned our influence as a member of CPTPP. We know that China applied to join in September 2021, so what assurances on economics and security have Ministers asked for from existing members in respect of China's application?

The Secretary of State also mentioned the chapters in CPTPP, including on workers' rights, on which she will know there are concerns in particular member countries. How will Ministers assure us that the strongest possible workers' rights are adhered to, to ensure that UK workers operate on a fair playing field and that vulnerable workers internationally do not face exploitation?

I know that the Secretary of State does not accept the estimate that accession is worth 0.08% of GDP but, rather than debate the figure, what proactive steps will the Government now take to support our exporters to ensure the figure is driven up?

Kemi Badenoch: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I know it must be difficult to sit on the Opposition Front Bench and find a way to celebrate while we agree this fantastic trade deal. The Labour Front Bench look like they have been sucking lemons. I am thrilled to be able to answer pretty much all his questions.

First, the right hon. Gentleman claims that this deal has happened at the expense of the India free trade agreement, but I stood at this Dispatch Box and told him that it is about the deal not the day. I know the Labour Front Bench would like us to rush into a deal that does not get the best for this country so that they have something to criticise, but we are not going to do that. We are going to negotiate a free trade agreement that is of mutual benefit and meets the needs of both UK and Indian citizens.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have not got a US FTA, but that is because the US is not doing FTAs with any countries; this has nothing to do specifically with the UK. When Administrations change, we cannot control what the partner country wants to do. So instead of just moaning, we have got on and

signed memorandums of understanding with US states. Indeed, the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) is not here today because he is on a plane to Oklahoma to sign such a deal. I am pleased to let the House know that.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about a quid pro quo, and this is absolutely right. One trade lesson 101 that I would like to give him is: you cannot agree a trade deal where you get everything you want and tell the people on the other side that they can have nothing. If he has a formula for negotiating a deal where we can sell everything to other countries and they cannot sell anything to us, he should come to the Floor of the House and explain how that can be done. A quid pro quo means having a deal that is of mutual benefit: we open our markets and they open theirs. When the legal text is done and we sign the agreement, there will be plenty of time to scrutinise—*[Interruption.]* He is chuntering from a sedentary position, "What is it? What is it?". I would like him to read the statement or listen to it. We have said that 99% of goods will be tariff-free. That is something that we have negotiated across all parties. We have also talked about what we get from rules of origin.

The right hon. Gentleman was clearly listening to me on the radio when he heard me dispute the 0.08% figure. That is not because the figure is wrong; it is because it is doing something different from what he thinks it is doing. It is a model, not a forecast. What we do with models is quite different from what we do with forecasts. The model he is touting at the moment is not tailored for the specific behaviour and dynamics of the UK economy, it uses data from 2014 and it excludes growth in the membership of the bloc to those who have applied. So what we should not look at is the 0.08% figure, as it is purely a measure of what would happen if we did not have this trade deal—that is how the model works, and models are not forecasts. Instead, I ask him to focus on the facts, which I have repeated time and time again: the global middle class is going to be coming from the Indo-Pacific; we are talking about 500 million consumers; and by 2050, it is going to outstrip the European Union. We are getting in from the ground up and we are going to be shaping the future of the UK for future generations. This is not about trying to grow trade in the next five minutes. I have used the example previously, but this is like investing in a start-up and complaining that it is not brought any money in as soon as you have signed the agreement. We are thinking about the future, not the past.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned what we are doing for the agricultural sector, and I point to what the National Farmers Union said. We know that British farming is not going to succeed unless we can export. We have created an exporting deal; this is not just about the exports, but the services. All of that is going to benefit farmers and the agricultural sector, to the point that the NFU has come out to support this deal. I hope that Opposition Members can do that, even though it was us who negotiated it. I would like it if they would think about the country and not just about party politics.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on her unshowy focus on delivery. Will she place on record, from the Dispatch Box, her and the Government's gratitude to our chief trade adviser, Crawford Falconer, and to the

[Conor Burns]

brilliant guy who has led the negotiations in the Department, Graham Zebedee, who has been tenacious in getting this deal over the line? She is right to say that we need to look again at the modelling that the Department uses for these deals. In doing that, does she agree that the best way to prove the doomsayers wrong is to herald the opportunities that accession to the CPTPP opens up to British businesses in every part of our United Kingdom and encourage them to exploit those opportunities for the benefit of the UK economy?

Kemi Badenoch: Absolutely. I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and also for the work he did when he was a Trade Minister in the former Department for International Trade. He is absolutely right to praise Crawford Falconer, the lead negotiator in the Department—or a “legend” as most other people would describe him—and also Graham Zebedee, who, at great personal cost to himself and his new baby, was out there negotiating a very difficult multilateral, not bilateral, deal.

My right hon. Friend is right to make the point about the figures and the modelling. This is a challenge that we face: there are many people who are, by and large, functionally innumerate and do not necessarily know when to use figures. The figures that we released from the Department were an impact assessment on the absence or presence of a trade deal. They are being misused by all sorts of detractors. [Interruption.] The shadow Minister says that civil servants do not tell lies. No, they do not. I have not said that the figures are incorrect; I have said that they are doing something quite different from what Labour Front Benchers think they are doing. I will explain it as much as is possible, but I cannot understand it for them. If they would like a lecture on what these forecasts and impact assessments do, I am very happy to give them one at a future date.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. No matter how she tries to dress this up, the CPTPP will still be a low standards agreement that lacks adequate safeguards and represents a poor substitute for all the trade deals that we have left behind. If this represents the future, then it is no wonder that people in Scotland are looking for a different future in that regard.

Previous Ministers—including the previous Brexit Secretary, no less—failed to understand the important role that the port of Dover plays in UK imports and exports. I would not normally consider this necessary, but I feel that I may have to explain, for the benefit of some of the sedentary chunterers across the Chamber, that the Pacific is quite some distance away from the UK, which is why even the Government’s own forecasts are predicting that the UK emissions of greenhouse gases will increase as a result of this deal.

The deal threatens UK food standards because it could open the door to pesticides that are banned in the UK for health and environmental reasons. Worryingly, it also includes text about investor-state dispute settlement clauses, with all the implications that carries, and for absolutely what? The Minister can dance on the head of a pin about the difference between models and forecasts, but the deal is still a pale imitation of the trade deals that we have left behind, with the 4% hit to GDP from Brexit.

Why are the Government so desperate to agree a deal that carries so many risks for so few potential rewards? Where is the support for the domestic agrifood sector? Finally, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, ActionAid, Fair Trade and the Trade Justice Movement all say that the deal makes a mockery of this Government’s sustainable trade goals. Are they wrong?

Kemi Badenoch: Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to apologise to our friends from Japan and Vietnam who had to listen to that diatribe, and to the hon. Gentleman calling this a low standards trade deal. It is just embarrassing and, frankly, really poor for diplomacy. This is a high standards deal. I know that it is a high standards deal because we went through agony in order to make sure that we could meet the high thresholds that the countries had set for us.

It is completely untrue to say that this deal lowers food standards. Food standards are not part of a free trade agreement. This is not the EU. We are not joining a political union. Our regulations stay in the UK. Fundamentally, that is something the SNP and other Members do not understand. We make the rules about our food standards. That means that if something does not meet UK food standards, it cannot be bought and sold into this country. What this deal is about is trade, not regulation. If Scotch whisky representatives and other Scottish exporters had to listen to what the hon. Gentleman had to say, I think they would be most incredibly disappointed. He does not understand trade. He is yet another person who has just read a press release from campaign groups and has not tested the arguments. I am very happy to stand at the Dispatch Box and rebut all that rubbish.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State to underline a point that I think she briefly made just now, which is that a welcome difference between the late—and not very much lamented—EU and the CPTPP is that the latter has no ambitions to create a politically unified superstate?

Kemi Badenoch: I wholeheartedly endorse my right hon. Friend’s comments. He is correct: this is purely a trade deal. I did not have the opportunity to say so in answer to the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) earlier, but to call this a “low standards agreement” is to forget its genesis. This deal was signed by the US, when it was called the trans-Pacific partnership, in 2016. The person who did not want it was President Donald Trump, so it is interesting to find that the hon. Gentleman and President Trump both disagree with the benefits of this deal—he is in interesting company. This deal is about the future of global trade and, as my right hon. Friend has just said, it is exactly the sort of deal we should be doing, rather than more political integration with other countries.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Do the Government support China’s application to join the CPTPP?

Kemi Badenoch: It would be quite wrong of me to start commenting on other countries’ accession when we have not even signed our agreement. Of course we will have a lot of interest in which countries will be joining—China is not the only one; Ecuador and South Korea have expressed interest, as has Indonesia. The fact is that we are getting in before others, so we will have a say in what the nature of their accession should be, and that is something to be celebrated.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this excellent deal and thank her for the care and consideration she has shown towards our farming community in her comments. Does this deal not put us in a much stronger position for future trade agreements with countries that we want to do business with, including perhaps even the United States?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is quite right that the standards we are setting here show the roadmap for what the UK is interested in and willing to do, particularly on services, which is quite novel for many of the old free trade agreements out there.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Many of the existing CPTPP members already have integrated supply chains due to their close geographic location in the Indo-Pacific region. One of the criticisms of the deal by experts, coupled with our rupture from the EU single market, is that Great Britain—excluding Northern Ireland—is effectively choosing to be more a customer than a participant in international manufacturing supply chains. What do the deal and the Government's trade strategy mean for manufacturers in Wales, Scotland and England?

Kemi Badenoch: The deal creates more flexible rules of origin regulations, which means that we will be able to sell tariff-free where there are integrated components of multiple products. Creating a more harmonised mutual recognition system between countries will make it much easier for those exporters, particularly in manufacturing, who want to take advantage of that. However, we also need to remember that this is not just an export of goods deal, but a services deal. The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) talked about distance, but we cannot put services on a container. One of the fantastic things here is that we are making regulations easier across the board in those services sectors I mentioned, and that will be good for Scottish businesses as well.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I certainly welcome the opportunities for the Scotch whisky industry in Malaysia. Does my right hon. Friend agree that countries such as Australia and New Zealand, both of which have Labour Governments, have welcomed the UK's accession to the partnership not just for the trade opportunities, but because of the values of this country and because they believe that our commitment to rules-based trade will enhance and grow the partnership?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend has said it better than I could. This deal has been universally welcomed across the board by countries with Governments of different political flavours, because they recognise that it is good not just for the UK or for them, but for global trade more broadly.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What prior discussions were there with the devolved institutions about the UK Government's negotiating position, and what is going to happen now? Will there be consultation on the ratification process?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, there was discussion. The process started in 2018, so it is not just something that happened under my tenure. There will be the usual process of

parliamentary scrutiny under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, where we will be able to look at all the detail, just as we did with the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Act 2023.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I serve as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Japan and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Japan.

Negotiations of the CPTPP involved a strong commitment from all member states, but will the Secretary of State join me in paying particular thanks to the Government of Japan for their strong support for the UK's application and their hard work as chair of the accession group? Does she look forward, as I do, to increasingly strong trade and investment between our two countries and other member states, especially in areas such as offshore wind and automotive, as well as in fintech, of which an important delegation from Japan is visiting the UK this very week?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity to say "yes" wholeheartedly in answer to his question, and to emphasise that this is not just an agricultural deal but one that cuts across multiple sectors. Most of all, I thank him for the opportunity to go into a little detail about Japan's chairing of the working group. Multilateral negotiations are just so much more complex, in an interesting way, than bilateral ones. I know that, for the Japanese, it was often like herding cats and took quite a lot of effort and patience to get all the negotiating parties in the same place for us to agree a deal, so I am particularly grateful to them for all their work.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The economic growth of CPTPP member Malaysia is largely dependent on palm oil, which raises environmental concerns. What plans do Ministers have to ensure that the UK's joining does not undermine our environmental principles?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, especially because it gives me an opportunity to expand on exactly what the implications of the tariff-free rate on Malaysian palm oil are. There are 9,500 lines of products in the tariff register, of which palm oil represents just a handful—maybe up to 10 or so. The UK Government share the regard for environmental protections, and we thought very carefully about them. It was not a decision we took lightly, but we arrived at the conclusion, based on the facts, that we already import only about 1% of Malaysia's palm oil and that keeping more tariffs on will not reforest. Malaysia has actually done a good job of reducing deforestation—deforestation related to palm oil fell by 60% in Malaysia in 2012—and 72% of UK palm oil imports in 2021 were certified as sustainable, up from 16%, so it is moving in a positive direction. We should not tell the story of palm oil of 20 or 30 years ago; things are quite different now. To go back to my point about standards, the standards for what we will import are written here, not in other countries.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State, as well as the civil servants, who may be watching on television back in the Department or—heaven forbid—may be even closer by? I remind her that she sent me to Indonesia for

[Sir James Duddridge]

a G20 trade meeting, and at that time it looked as if we were going to do a deal in years, not months. Other than her excellence and my departure from the Department, what brought about the speed of that change, and what lessons can be learned for other deals?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for all his hard work as Trade Minister and on continued strong bilateral relations with Indonesia. I may have misspoken—I think I might have meant Thailand when I said Indonesia in relation to the long list of countries that we are accessing—but he will be pleased to know that a lot of work is being done to continue strengthening economic ties and relations. These are all countries in the Indo-Pacific; they have huge populations and love the UK, not just because he has been visiting and touting all our good works—although that has played a large part in it—but because of the soft power and good diplomatic and global outreach of our civil servants, whom he mentioned, and our diplomats worldwide.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I was worried by the Secretary of State's answer to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on what we would do if China asked to join. Given the work that has been done in this House, particularly on the Uyghur genocide and on the abuses of human rights and democracy in Hong Kong, I hope that she will join those of us who want to hold China to account. The idea of giving China preferential tariffs right now, or at any point in the near future, is unconscionable. Does she perhaps have warmer words for Taiwan, which has tentatively expressed an interest in joining the trade group, and will she consider having a positive thing to say for Taiwan if it wished to do so?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know what she is trying to do, and I appreciate the effort, but it is not my job, as Trade Secretary, to make foreign policy at the Dispatch Box on an agreement that China is not in. These are hypothetical, speculative questions. They are serious ones, but I am not the Foreign Secretary and it is not for me to answer them. We have had multiple debates in the House about the economic challenge that China presents, as well as on many other issues relating to China, but it has not even joined the bloc. Throwing our weight about and saying who we would or would not block is not the right way to go about things. However, I am very happy to extend warm words about Taiwan. She will know that Government Members have done and said a lot to ensure that it continues to do well economically. It is not for me to go into specifics; it is best for me to be appropriate in the remarks that I make at the Dispatch Box on international diplomacy and foreign policy.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I very much welcome the agreement. As the Secretary of State knows, we have fantastic manufacturing industries in Stoke-on-Trent. In particular, our world-renowned ceramics industry has fantastic products that it is waiting to export. Will she detail the opportunities for these industries to export more of their fantastic wares around the world?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Federation of Small Businesses has said that there are significant export markets for small UK firms. Once we have signed the agreement and have all the legislation in place, he will be able to talk about the trade utilisation of the agreements that the Department for Business and Trade supports. If Members have businesses in their constituency that want to find out more, the best way to find out the specifics for their sector would be to contact their local DBT—as it is now—representative.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I look forward to questioning the Secretary of State on the agreement in more detail at a meeting of the International Trade Committee later this week, because detail is thin on the ground at the moment, although I am sure we will get there. She has mentioned that she cares greatly for sovereignty and the environment. In the negotiations, what concessions were asked for with regard to excluding us from the threat of the ISDS and excluding palm oil, or did our negotiators not even raise those issues?

Kemi Badenoch: The key point to explain is that the investment chapter in the agreement includes investor protections, and they are backed by a modern and transparent ISDS mechanism. It is not quite correct to say that there is no protection for investors; we are just doing it in a different way.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is always funny hearing the Opposition speak about our trade deals, because since they last brought the issue to the House, we have signed a memorandum of understanding with Indiana, North Carolina and South Carolina; made a deal with Israel, Australia and New Zealand; and got a ratification and an improved deal with Japan. We also continue to look at the Gulf Co-operation Council, and now we have CPTPP.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on her work on the trade agreement. She talks about the agriculture community; can she confirm that the Trade and Agriculture Commission will have a role in scrutinising the agreement? She also mentioned that under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, there will be the opportunity for the House to scrutinise the agreement. Will that have to be done within 21 days? Will we have a vote and a debate on the agreement on the Floor of the House?

Kemi Badenoch: I am very pleased to confirm to my hon. Friend that we will present CPTPP to Parliament for scrutiny for 21 days after signing, as per the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act, which he mentioned. Relevant Committees will also get time to scrutinise the accession. He will know that we have updated the International Trade Committee regularly at both chief negotiator and ministerial level since the launch of negotiations in 2021. I look forward to all the additional scrutiny that I know that he and other colleagues will provide.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Many exporting businesses would welcome, as the Secretary of State put it in her statement, “reduced red tape and simplified customs procedures across the bloc”.

However, they want it rather closer to home, I think. Businesses such as Seiont Nurseries in my constituency find that the only practicable way of exporting plants to Ireland is via England, Belgium and France, before finally reaching our near neighbour—a country that is actually visible to us across the Irish sea. Can the Secretary of State tell the House in any detail how this agreement will benefit small exporting businesses in north-west Wales?

Kemi Badenoch: It will benefit businesses in north-west Wales in exactly the same way as it will benefit all the nations of the UK—this is not a deal that is particular to any one nation. The hon. Gentleman should tell his businesses about the words of the many business representative organisations and larger company representatives who have been talking about what a fantastic deal this will be for this country; we are happy to provide some of those quotes, if he is concerned. The Windsor framework has made this deal even easier by ensuring that Northern Ireland in particular is not left out and has just the same benefits as all the other nations in the UK—in fact, more benefits.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Laurels in abundance are due to the Secretary of State and her team for a significant achievement. The urgent need to reorient our economy to the east was one of the many reasons why so many of us voted to leave the European Union.

On 3 November, I asked the then Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), about the place that lamb and sheepmeat and UK lamb and sheep farmers played in the CPTPP negotiations. Will the Secretary of State outline the benefits to those specific producers of sheepmeat that she has achieved in this deal, so that I can reassure the farmers of North West Hampshire—and, indeed, the whole of the United Kingdom—that our fantastic British lamb will appear on tables across the world?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend will be very pleased to know that I have good news for his sheep farmers, which is that we have created more liberalised market access for them in many of the CPTPP countries. That includes some countries with which we already had deals, but now there will be staged liberalisation—in countries such as Mexico, in particular, there will be significant benefits. As I said earlier, we know that exporting is what will be most helpful to our agricultural sector, and ensuring that farmers in my right hon. Friend's constituency have more markets and deeper, broader markets to export to is one of the reasons why I am very proud to be supporting this deal.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Unlike the distinct lack of opportunity and ambition among Opposition Members, I very much welcome the UK's acceding to the CPTPP—it

is a real commitment to the Pacific region and to global Britain. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the future share of the global market of the CPTPP versus that of the European Union?

Kemi Badenoch: Quite a significant assessment. As I said in my statement, CPTPP is a trade bloc with over 500 million people and a collective GDP worth £9 trillion, but compared with the EU, it is growing faster. In terms of GDP, the partnership is projected to grow faster than the EU, with the countries currently in the CPTPP expected to increase in size by nearly 60% over the next three decades, compared with 42% for the EU.

One thing that I really want to emphasise, because there seems to be some confusion about this in the broader narrative, is that this is not a deal to replace our deal with the EU. We already have a free trade agreement with the EU—we did not leave with no deal—so we will be the only country that has such a comprehensive EU free trade agreement and is a member of CPTPP. That is quite a unique and fantastic position for the UK economy to be in, so I hope that that is something I have been able to clarify for Members across the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Paul Bristow.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I remind the House that I serve as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK. CPTPP will bring the UK into an exclusive global free trade bloc with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, on top of individual trade agreements of varying depth with each country. Free trade co-ordination between Canada, Australia and New Zealand and the UK is one of the three key aims of the CANZUK campaign. Does the Minister agree that this alliance is another step closer to what is, I believe, the desirable outcome of stronger economic, diplomatic and cultural ties between all CANZUK countries?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He makes the point very well that CPTPP comes on top of bilateral trade agreements. There are many assumptions that if there is already a bilateral deal, there is no additional benefit from CPTPP, but that is definitely not the case—there is an additional benefit of having a broader market. I talked about the rules of origin and being able to use components from different countries, but he is right about the geopolitical perspective and how we can look at our security, and at our economic security in particular. We can look at things such as critical minerals, where we have just signed a memorandum of understanding with Canada, and the supply chain there. There is a lot of good work being done to help integrate us with like-minded partners around the world.

Sudan

5.25 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the situation in Sudan.

The Foreign Secretary is in Japan at the G7 summit. He led a call this morning with the United States and the United Arab Emirates to co-ordinate our response. I know the House will join me in strongly condemning the violence taking place in Khartoum and across Sudan. The violence broke out between the Sudanese armed forces, the SAF, and the Rapid Support Forces, the RSF, in Khartoum on Saturday morning. This is a tragic turn of events after months of constructive dialogue and progress towards a civilian-led transitional Government following the military coup in 2021. It is unclear which side was responsible for initiating the violence, but it comes after rising tensions between the SAF and RSF over leadership arrangements for a unified force under a civilian Government.

The humanitarian and security situation has deteriorated since October 2021, when General Burhan launched the coup, taking control of Sudan from the civilian transitional Government. Last July, the military committed to step back from politics and allow civilian groups to form a Government. After signing a political agreement in December, negotiations had been making good progress, with a final agreement due to be signed on 6 April and a civilian Government to be put in place on 11 April. That progress stalled in recent weeks due to failures within the military to agree on a unified command structure for a single military under the transitional Government. Despite diplomatic efforts from the international community, those tensions have now led to violent conflict. The escalating violence is incredibly worrying, with heavy artillery and air bombardment being used in civilian and urban areas. The airport in the centre of the city came under heavy gunfire on Saturday and is closed. The violence is also spreading, with reports of armed clashes involving heavy weaponry in cities across the country.

Innocent civilians have already lost their lives, and I am appalled that that includes Relief International personnel and three World Food Programme staff members. The whole House will join me in sending our condolences to their families and friends and to Relief International and the entire World Food Programme community. Continued fighting will only cost further civilian lives and worsen the existing humanitarian crisis. Aid workers and civilians must never be a target. Aid agencies must be allowed to deliver lifesaving assistance safely to those in desperate need. It is a disgusting turn of events, though sadly not unique, that humanitarians are targeted in this way.

Turning to the British Government's response, we are advising against all travel to Sudan. Our global response centre is taking calls and supporting British nationals and their relatives. We are advising civilians caught up in the violence, including our own staff, to shelter in place as heavy fighting continues. Our priority is to protect British nationals trapped by the violence, and we will continue to issue updates as the situation develops.

We are pursuing all diplomatic avenues to end the violence and de-escalate tensions. The Foreign Secretary and I are working with international partners to engage all parties. The UK special representative for Sudan and South Sudan, the special envoy for the horn of Africa and the British embassy in Khartoum are fully mobilised to support those efforts. We are calling on both sides to break the cycle of violence and return to negotiations, and to agree an immediate return to civilian Government for the sake of the people of Sudan and the region. Yesterday, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development convened an extraordinary summit of Heads of State and Governments to discuss ways to restore calm. We will support any mediation efforts they undertake. The UN Security Council will discuss the situation later today.

A peaceful political transition to democracy and civilian governance is still possible in Sudan. I ask the House to join me in calling on the leaders of both sides in this conflict to end the violence and de-escalate tensions. They must uphold their responsibility to protect civilians, ensure humanitarian assistance can continue to be delivered safely and allow the transition to civilian leadership immediately. The UK stands in solidarity with the people of Sudan in their demands for a peaceful and democratic future. This violence must end before more innocent civilians lose their lives. I commend this statement to the House.

5.31 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The violence being inflicted on the Sudanese people is heartbreaking: the Sudanese people want peace, not violence. I am very grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. They want calm, not fear, and they want a full transition to civilian-led Government, not conflict, but the hopes of the Sudanese people have yet again been smashed by the self-interest of a few generals.

The violence comes after months of faithful negotiations and a consistent commitment to peaceful demonstrations in the face of hardship and brutal repression. As of this morning, almost 100 civilians have been killed, including three World Food Programme workers. The violence is spreading across the country, and an already dire conflict could get even worse. Hospitals are running out of crucial supplies, aid access is now severely limited and there was already a food crisis across Sudan.

The UK has a special responsibility as the penholder for Sudan in the United Nations Security Council. We now need a plan for worst-case scenarios, including famine. We need regional international partners to join our calls for an immediate end to hostilities and to refrain from any action that could fuel the violence. I note the Foreign Secretary's joint statement alongside Secretary Blinken this morning, of course, and I hope that the Government are sending the same message loud and clear to our partners in the Gulf and north Africa, as well as to those who may wish to exploit this tragedy.

One issue could be at stake: whether Russia is given its long-desired Red sea military base at Port Sudan. What is the Minister's assessment of the risk that Russia, the Wagner Group or Eritrea will take advantage by backing the RSF? We need to face the reality that, if there is no ceasefire and no quick victory for either side, the conflict could spread and intensify further in Darfur,

the south and the eastern regions. If that happens, the risks of mass atrocities and of regional destabilisation will increase. This year is the 20th anniversary of the start of the acts of genocide in Darfur. The lack of accountability and resolution for those crimes against humanity is part, of course, of today's conflict, and we must do all we can to avoid the risk that such abuses will return, as the scale of the consequence would be great.

The integrated review refresh announced the abolition of the conflict, stability and security fund and that its replacement, the UK integrated security fund, would merge national and international security. I ask the Minister: how will the new UKISF engage with the situation in Sudan?

Chad, the Central African Republic, Libya and South Sudan are all vulnerable to spreading violence and are ill-prepared to cope with massive further flows of refugees. There are welcome steps towards an African-led mediation, with the African Union chairperson and the Presidents of South Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti all expected in Khartoum now for that to take place.

The whole House will recognise that this is a crisis of great severity and urgency. The risks to life and regional security are massive. We must clearly work together across this House with our allies, partners and through the UN to do all we can to end this brutal violence. The Sudanese people's dreams of long-term peace must now be realised.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his words, the tone of his comments and the advice he has eloquently given. I also thank him for what he said about the dreadful disaster of the deaths of the humanitarian workers and standing in solidarity, as we all do, across the House, about that.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the UN. As he rightly said, we hold the pen and there is a meeting later today. He asked about the messages that have been given. He will know that both the Troika and the Quad are engaged in this, as the Foreign Secretary said this morning. In respect of Russia and other regimes, we are of course watching very carefully any response from other members of the international community.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned what happened in Darfur. I first went to Darfur in 2005 to see for myself what George Bush, the President of the United States, referred to as a genocide then, and we are living today, as the right hon. Gentleman said, with many aspects of its legacy. Both the SAF and the RSF are again showing total disregard for the will and hopes of the Sudanese people, who deserve so much more and so much better.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The situation in Sudan is utterly heartbreaking. Three days of hostilities will only have brought pain and loss to civilians, and three humanitarian workers have lost their lives. The UK is the penholder for Sudan, so the world will be looking to us to lead on this. I hope the UK will step forward in that role.

I have a few questions for the Minister. First, what are we doing to monitor, prevent and collect evidence of atrocities that are taking place, because we must ensure there is accountability? Secondly, a number of sanctions were due to be lifted last week in the hope that the

transfer of power would take place. It clearly has not, so can the Minister please confirm that there will be no lifting of those sanctions? Thirdly, the head of Sudan's army has said he is open to negotiations. I would be grateful for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's assessment of how sincere that is.

Finally, I turn to the two most important points for me. The first is the safety of our people in Khartoum. I understand that movement around the capital is incredibly difficult at the moment. There are questions about the airport and whether it can still be used. How confident are we about the safety of our people, because there were families still at post? Secondly, how many British nationals remain in Sudan? I did not hear the word "evacuate" in the Minister's comments, so I am concerned about the safety of all those British nationals at this time.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for her remarks. I make it clear that we call on all sides to agree immediately to a return to civilian Government, and we urge all relevant authorities to protect civilians and honour fully the international conventions and rules that are there to secure the safety of non-combatants.

My hon. Friend asked about the evidence of atrocities. I assure her that the culture of impunity will not prevail here. Many of us marched against General Bashir back in 2007-08 when atrocities were going on in Darfur. The international community is still seeking to get General Bashir, who is currently under house arrest in Khartoum, in front of The Hague, so there can be no impunity at all.

My hon. Friend asked about the lifting of sanctions. No sanctions will be lifted at this time, but of course the debt relief that Sudan was going to get, which was almost within its grasp, is now in peril and will not take place while this situation continues.

My hon. Friend asked about the safety of our people in Khartoum. The embassy is dealing with 100 calls that have come in from the British community and we are of course prioritising the safety of our people in Khartoum, which is of great concern to us. On issues of evacuation and so forth, we are in close touch with our allies.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The word "heartbreaking" has been used by a number of colleagues already this afternoon and I will be no exception. The recent events in Sudan are a tragedy because there was some progress. That makes it all the more poignant that we are now dealing with the current situation.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. He can rest assured of our support for a durable peace—I think everybody across the House would support that—but the UK is the penholder and surely there needs to be a concrete plan to bring the parties together. I am sure that is being worked on at the moment, but we would like to see it.

Sudan already hosts a number of refugees from other conflicts, so what assessment has the FCDO made of the risk of the refugee camps themselves becoming conflict areas and the likelihood of them being factionalised?

As we have heard, the risk of evacuation of UK personnel from the theatre is really important. A lot of lessons will need to be learned from previous evacuations in similar circumstances and I hope the Minister is alive to that.

[Alyn Smith]

What support is already under consideration for neighbouring countries? The risk of escalation to neighbouring countries, with other actors intervening on one side or the other, is significant. What support are the UK Government contemplating to neighbouring countries to help to keep them as stable as they can be in this situation?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support and for his commitment to the unity of the House on this matter. He asked me about the risks to the refugee camps and others. The answer is that, resulting from what we have seen, there are extraordinary risks to these people. There is, I hope, a particularly hot corner of hell reserved for those who deploy and use heavy weapons in built-up areas. In terms of the additional actions we can take, we welcome the efforts of IGAD to de-escalate the situation and restore calm. We will continue to use every method at our disposal to promote that.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): A number of individuals have mentioned the region more widely, particularly given Saudi, UAE and Russian influence, but what consideration has the Department given to South Sudan, which is itself quite unstable and relies on revenue sharing from oil? I understand the pipelines go through there. They could easily be closed off and be a problem, in addition to the problems in Tigray, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right and has considerable experience of these matters. He will understand that this is an unstable region, particularly at this time. The events that have taken place in Sudan, in particular in Khartoum but also elsewhere in the country, have made that instability all the greater.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Before this latest tragic escalation and outbreak of violence, Sudan was already in the grip of an inflation and food insecurity crisis, exacerbated by the floods last year. Sadly, there are 16 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The Government recently outlined UK aid allocations for Africa in 2023-24, which revealed further deep cuts in humanitarian assistance for the region. Can the Minister outline whether those deep cuts will be reversed and what support exactly will be allocated to Sudan this year?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. What I can tell him is that the figure is rather more than he suggested; I think something like 27 million people are in need of support at this time. We have spent £250 million over the past five—I am sorry, his figure of 16 million is correct. We have spent £250 million over the past five years. He asked me what we have spent. In the last year, in 2021-22, we spent £27.7 million. He will also be aware that all aid to Sudanese authorities was stopped after the negotiations broke down and the coup took place, except for humanitarian support, water and the work we do to combat female genital mutilation. Also, we, the World Bank and others secured, in 2021-22, \$100 million for the world food programme. He may rest assured that, on humanitarian support, while we do not go through the Sudanese authorities, we are watching this and playing our part.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan, I join the Minister and others in my utter condemnation of the violence, which will make the situation of the 16 million people in the country in need of humanitarian assistance even more precarious. There is bound to be more migration and more innocent deaths. May I encourage him to continue to work with all regional and international partners to try to stop the violence and get humanitarian aid flowing? The APPG recently took evidence from Luis Ocampo, the International Criminal Court prosecutor, who indicted Bashir 14 years ago for genocide. The man has never gone to court and the prosecutor pointed out that, for so long as he stays out of court, other people will think they can get away with war crimes—other people locally and Putin himself. So, please, never give up and never let the international community give up on taking this man to court.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend has wrestled with these issues recently in government, and I am grateful for what she said. We will continue to work together as she suggests. We will never give up. The point I made to the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), is true: we will never accept a culture of impunity. The ICC successfully indicted General Bashir. No one would have believed that he would go anywhere near the court, but today he is under house arrest. All those Bosnian leaders believed that they could flee and secure impunity, but in the end they were all subject to international justice. I give my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) an absolute undertaking that we will do everything we can, particularly in our role in the international community, to ensure that there is no impunity for the events taking place in Khartoum and across Sudan.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The scenes in Sudan are heartbreaking—the needless loss of the lives not just of civilians but of the brave aid workers who go into those jobs with the biggest of hearts but, in this case, have paid the biggest of prices. I add my voice to those across the House in utter condemnation, and I urge the Minister and the Government to do whatever they can, working with the Quad and the African Union to look at all possibilities. Is there a possibility of an African Union peacekeeping force backed by the Quad? I hope that the Minister can be assured of unanimous support across this House for whatever efforts the Government make to stop this violence from spreading in the first place.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her support and her remarks. In respect of the African Union and any decisions by the Quad, I am sure that she will understand that it is probably too early to pursue that specifically. I also thank her for her condemnation of those who attack humanitarian workers. As I said in my statement, Relief International has lost one, and the World Food Programme has lost three. Two further World Food Programme officials have been very seriously injured.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome not just the content but the tone of my right hon. Friend's statement. He will know, because he has witnessed it, that there is already a

food and hunger crisis in east Africa. What steps does he think can be taken to ensure that these dreadful events do not overflow and further destabilise the situation in neighbouring countries?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend puts his finger on a most important point. It was alluded to earlier that these events will engender the fragility and vulnerability of the whole region, with an impact on starvation and malnutrition. All I can say to him is that we are watching the situation—in particular the humanitarian situation—with our partners with the greatest possible care. When I was in Somalia before Christmas we did a small co-financing deal with another country. I hope that we will do more of those deals, specifically targeted at the humanitarian situation in that part of Africa and elsewhere.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Concerns are being raised that during this ongoing conflict young women and girls in the region are at higher risk of being forced into child marriages, either through abduction or due to financial insecurity and food scarcity among families. What discussions have there been around providing specific support to young women and girls who find themselves in danger of involuntary marriage?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right to say that in disorder and chaos those sorts of arrangements follow. Women and girls are among the most vulnerable parts of the community. We put them at the centre of everything we do because the impact and effect of deep poverty, which international development seeks to tackle, cannot be understood unless it is seen through the eyes of girls and women. The hon. Lady may rest assured that the issue that she raises is right at the front of our priorities in these sorts of situations.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I, too, am heartbroken for the women I met in Darfur, who only want peace, security and to be able to educate their children; for the young women who protested and brought down al-Bashir, who hoped to see their country move towards democracy instead of another civil war; and for the World Food Programme workers, who deliver food in some of the hardest situations on the planet. My questions are about money. To what extent has the UK had to reduce its bilateral funding in Sudan? Who exactly is it who funds the 100,000 members of the Rapid Support Forces?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend asks a couple of very important and good questions. She, like me, has visited Darfur and seen the plight of women caused by the disorder and destruction. Indeed, I first met our late colleague, Jo Cox, in Darfur, looking at how we could improve the plight of women there.

I cannot give my hon. Friend a detailed commentary on the funding of those groups, which as she rightly says is extremely important, but I can tell her that we will look at all these things, in every possible way, in our bid to bring peace to Sudan at this time.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Once again, following the terrible civil war in South Sudan, we are witnessing the spectacle of two men fighting each other over who should be in charge and, in the process, inflicting terrible

suffering on the people of their country and claiming the lives of the brave World Food Programme workers. I join the Minister in expressing my heartfelt condolences to everyone who has lost loved ones in what has happened so far.

It has been reported that the chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, is planning to travel to Khartoum immediately in an attempt to broker a ceasefire. Is the Minister able to give us any further information about that mission, to which I am sure the UK will be giving every support?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, who has had specific responsibility for these matters in the past, will know the very close relationship we have with all parts of the African Union. He may rest assured that we will do everything we can to help any initiative that the African Union is launching, at this time or later. In respect of what he says about the two generals who are perpetrating this carnage, I can only say that I completely agree with him.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Just over a week ago, I was in Ethiopia, with three other hon. Members. We saw the effects of malnutrition on vulnerable children and adults. Some 20 million people are suffering in that area, largely because of drought but also because of conflict. Does my right hon. Friend agree that nothing destroys a country's economy and humanitarian situation quicker than conflict? If so, will he make that point to both sides as effectively as I know he can?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is, of course, right that all the development indicators have gone backwards in Ethiopia, but following the peace agreements last November, we are seeing good progress in Ethiopia. We must pray that that continues. What he says about drought and conflict is right. Conflict is development in reverse, and it is extremely important for us to remember what he says as we grapple with this crisis.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) alluded to, Sudan is home to more than 1 million refugees, which puts some of the complaints from Conservative Back Benchers about asylum seekers arriving in this country into perspective. How are the Government ensuring that refugees and displaced people in Sudan—particularly those from Eritrea, at whom there are reports of particularly violent extortion being targeted—are supported and protected?

Mr Mitchell: The principal way in which we help, particularly in respect of refugees from Eritrea, is through the United Nations and its agencies. The hon. Gentleman may rest assured that we are fully engaged in that. Britain—the British taxpayer—is an enormous funder of those agencies, and their work on the ground is absolutely vital.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Over the past decade, Sudan had achieved real progress on freedom of religion or belief. The international freedom of religion or belief leadership network is very concerned about the breakdown in security, which we hope will not set back such progress. As Sudan is a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

[Fiona Bruce]

Office human rights priority country, will the Government press all sides in Sudan to respect international humanitarian and human rights laws and to recognise the serious human rights concerns, including on freedom of religion or belief?

Mr Mitchell: We certainly will.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is absolutely tragic that yet again the people of Sudan are losing their lives in a conflict that is no fault of their own. In such conflict zones, one of the first things to happen is hospitals being overwhelmed by large numbers of casualties, so what will the Minister do to ensure that medical aid and assistance reaches all those who need it? What work is he doing with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières and others to ensure people can get medical aid?

Mr Mitchell: Britain has a close and enormously supportive relationship with the International Red Cross, and the hon. Gentleman may rest assured that we will use that relationship to help the people who are in such jeopardy. Some 100 people are already dead as a result of the conflict and, as of tonight, there is no sign of the conflict stopping. We are doing everything we possibly can, pursuing all diplomatic avenues, to resolve the conflict and return to a civilian-led transitional government.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is there any ideological basis for the rift between the two warring military leaders? What attitude do we believe that Egypt is taking to the conflict? What assessment have the Government made of the risk of Islamist extremism re-emerging in Sudan as a result of the conflict?

Mr Mitchell: There is every danger of that happening as a result of the disorder and chaos that we are witnessing. My right hon. Friend asks if there is any ideological rift between the two generals who are perpetrating this warfare. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out, the conflict is characterised by two powerful men fighting it out for power.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I join colleagues from across the House in condemning the atrocities taking place in Sudan. Given that more than 100 civilians have already lost their lives, including three aid workers, and the conflict shows no sign of easing, will the Minister set out what steps the UK will take as the penholder for Sudan at the UN Security Council, including some specific actions?

Mr Mitchell: As I said earlier, the United Nations is meeting today. We are the penholder at the United Nations and we will be pressing all parties to lay down their weapons. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development—IGAD—has issued a statement about its efforts to de-escalate the situation and restore calm. In addition, there is the work of the Quad, which the Foreign Secretary spoke about this morning, and the Troika—Norway, the United States and Britain. All these entities, of which Britain is a key part, are fundamentally engaged in trying to bring the conflict to a close.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): A few years ago, my wife, Natalie, and I spent some time in Sudan. It was a wonderful experience, with wonderful people, and the country's rich cultural heritage was clear. World heritage sites, from those in Meroe and Gebel Barkal to the pyramids at Nuri and the ancient Christian sites at Old Dongola, are at risk. What steps are the Government taking to work with UNESCO and other such bodies to protect the ancient history of Sudan's constructions? After all, there are more pyramids in Sudan than there are in Egypt.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend's cultural point is entirely right, and I have no doubt that we will come to it in due course. He went to Sudan; today I want to salute the incredible bravery of citizens there who are trying to restore democracy and the things we often take for granted in this House, and who are being attacked by the military on both sides of the conflict for no reason of any benefit at all to Sudan.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The situation in Sudan is clearly very worrying, as everybody has laid out. Just shy of 3,000 Sudanese nationals claimed asylum in the UK last year. What conversations has the Minister had with the Home Secretary and the Minister for Immigration to ensure that Home Office officials take account of the up-to-date advice that he has issued this evening, and that nobody is sent back to a dangerous situation in Sudan? Furthermore, will he learn from the situation in Afghanistan and put in place a scheme to ensure that those who already have family here in the UK can be swiftly reunited with them through a safe and legal route?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will know that in such situations there are clear rules that kick in about the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. She may rest assured that Britain will shoulder its responsibilities in that respect absolutely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his answers to all our questions. Freedom of religious belief is a matter that interests me greatly in this House. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I share the concerns to which the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) referred. In 2023, Sudan rose to ninth place on the Open Doors world watch list: it is one of the top 10 lists that no one would ever want to be on, but Sudan is on it. The freedoms that religious minorities began to experience after al-Bashir's regime were cruelly stripped away after the 2021 coup. I know that the Minister shares our concerns. What assessment has been made of the outlook for the human rights of religious minorities if the violence continues to escalate?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman—not for the first time today—for his wisdom and good sense. I acknowledge his authority and hard work, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), in standing up for religious freedom. On his point about the dangers to those who seek to exercise their right to freedom for their faith, the prospects tonight in Sudan are extremely gloomy.

Points of Order

6.2 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I say that it is very nice to see you back in the Chair?

On World Haemophilia Day, I am disappointed that there has been no statement from the Government in the light of Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report on the infected blood inquiry, which was published during the Easter recess with very clear recommendations for the Government on the urgent action required for compensation. As I know you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, 500 people have died since the inquiry was set up. Has Mr Speaker had any indication from the Government that they will make a statement to the House this week to set out their response to this landmark report from a public inquiry that they themselves set up in 2017?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for notice of it. The whole House fully appreciates that this is an extremely important and very sad matter. She has raised it very effectively countless times in this Chamber, so I am not surprised by her point of order today. What is surprising is that I am able to give a straight answer to a point of order: I understand that the Government's intention is to make an oral statement about the matter on Wednesday of this week. That is the information that I have, and I hope that it is accurate. If no such statement is forthcoming, I am sure that the right hon. Lady will waste no time in finding ways to pursue the very reasonable question that she has asked.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) in welcoming you back to your place—it is good to see you.

On Friday 14 April, officers of Wirral Council were informed that the Home Office intends to strand up to 1,500 vulnerable asylum seekers on a berthed vessel on the Wirral Waters development site. The plans, which have been made without any meaningful consultation with the council, are now public knowledge, but Ministers have still not provided any kind of update to me as one of the local Members of Parliament. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you clarify whether the Government have any obligation to inform Members of this House about major decisions relating to their constituency before they enter the public domain? Can you advise me on how to ensure that Ministers meet me to discuss the matter at the earliest opportunity?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I fully appreciate why he wants to raise the matter, which is so crucial to his constituency, but I have to say that although it is always considered good practice and good manners for Government Departments to inform local Members of Parliament about major initiatives that affect their constituents, there is no parliamentary rule that requires Ministers to inform the local Member of Parliament before such an announcement is made.

The hon. Gentleman asks how he might pursue the matter. He has a range of available remedies; I am quite sure that the Table Office will be able to advise him on how he might bring the matter forward. I am sure that he will also be asking for a meeting with the Minister, and I hope that his points will be passed to the appropriate Minister by a Member on the Treasury Bench.

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I got a nod there. Thank you very much.

Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

6.6 pm

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Data is already the fuel driving the digital age: it powers the everyday apps that we use, public services are being improved by its better use and businesses rely on it to trade, produce goods and deliver services for their customers. But how we choose to use data going forward will become even more important: it will determine whether we can grow an innovative economy with well-paid, high-skill jobs, it will shape our ability to compete globally in developing the technologies of the future and it will increasingly say something about the nature of our democratic society. The great challenge for democracies, as I see it, will be how to use data to empower rather than control citizens, enhancing their privacy and sense of agency without letting authoritarian states—which, in contrast, use data as a tool to monitor and harvest information from citizens—dominate technological advancement and get a competitive advantage over our companies.

The UK cannot step aside from the debate by simply rubber-stamping whatever iteration of the GDPR comes out of Brussels. We have in our hands a critical opportunity to take a new path and, in doing so, to lead the global conversation about how we can best use data as a force for good—a conversation in which using data more effectively and maintaining high data protection standards are seen not as contradictory but as mutually reinforcing objectives, because trust in this more effective system will build the confidence to share information. We start today not by kicking off a revolution, turning over the apple cart and causing a compliance headache for UK firms, but by beginning an evolution away from an inflexible one-size-fits-all regime and towards one that is risk-based and focused on innovation, flexibility and the needs of our citizens, scientists, public services and companies.

Businesses need data to make better decisions and to reach the right consumers. Researchers need data to discover new treatments. Hospitals need it to deliver more personalised patient care. Our police and security services need data to keep our people safe. Right now, our rules are too vague, too complex and too confusing always to understand. The GDPR is a good standard, but it is not the gold standard. People are struggling to utilise data to innovate, because they are tied up in burdensome activities that are not fundamentally useful in enhancing privacy.

A recently published report on compliance found that 81% of European publishers were unknowingly in breach of the GDPR, despite doing what they thought the law required of them. A YouGov poll from this year found that one in five marketing professionals in the UK report knowing absolutely nothing about the GDPR, despite being bound by it. It is not just businesses: the people whose privacy our laws are supposed to protect do not understand it either. Instead, they click away the thickest of cookie pop-ups just so they can see their screen.

The Bill will maintain the high standards of data protection that British people rightly expect, but it will also help the people who are most affected by data regulation, because we have co-designed it with those people to ensure that our regulation reflects the way in which real people live their lives and run their businesses.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the retention and enhancement of public trust in data is a major issue, that sharing data is a major issue for the public, and that the Government must do more—perhaps she can tell us whether they intend to do more—to educate the public about how and where our data is used, and what powers individuals have to find out this information?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful intervention. She is right: as I said earlier, trust in the system is fundamental to whether citizens have the confidence to share their data and whether we can therefore make use of that data. She made a good point about educating people, and I hope that this debate will mark the start of an important public conversation about how people use data. One of the challenges we face is a complex framework which means that people do not even know how to talk about data, and I think that some of the simplifications we wish to introduce will help us to understand one of the fundamental principles to which we want our new regime to adhere.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. Friend gave a long list of people who found the rules we had inherited from outside the UK challenging. She might add to that list Members of Parliament themselves. I am sure I am not alone in having been exasperated by being complained about to the Information Commissioner, in this case by a constituent who had written to me complaining about a local parish council. When I shared his letter with the parish council so that it could show how bogus his long-running complaint had been, he proceeded to file a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office because I had shared his phone number—which he had not marked as private—with the parish council, with which he had been in correspondence for several years. The Information Commissioner's Office took that seriously. This sort of nonsense shows how over-restrictive regulations can be abused by people who are out to stir up trouble unjustifiably.

Julia Lopez: Let me gently say that if my right hon. Friend's constituent was going to pick on one Member of Parliament with whom to raise this point, the Member of Parliament who does not, I understand, use emails would be one of the worst candidates. However, I entirely understand Members' frustration about the current rules. We are looking into what we can do in relation to democratic engagement, because, as my right hon. Friend says, this is one of the areas in which there is not enough clarity about what can and cannot be done.

We want to reduce burdens on businesses, and above all for the small businesses that account for more than 99% of UK firms. I am pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), is present to back up those proposals. Businesses that do not have the time, the money or the staff to spend precious hours doing unnecessary form-filling are currently

being forced to follow some of the same rules as a billion-dollar technology company. We are therefore cutting the amount of pointless paperwork, ensuring that organisations only have to comply with rules on record-keeping and risk assessment when their processing activities are high-risk. We are getting rid of excessively demanding requirements to appoint data protection officers, giving small businesses much more flexibility when it comes to how they manage data protection risks without procuring external resources.

Those changes will not just make the process simpler, clearer and easier for businesses, they will make it cheaper too. We are expecting micro and small businesses to save nearly £90 million in compliance costs every year: that is £90 million more for higher investment, faster growth and better jobs. According to figures published in 2021, data-driven trade already generates 85% of our services exports. Our new international transfers regime clarifies how we can build data bridges to support the close, free and safe exchange of data with other trusted allies.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State talk about reducing regulatory burdens without compromising the standards that we are none the less delivering—that is the central distinction, and greatly to be welcomed for its benefits for the entrepreneurialism and fleetness of foot of British industry. Does she agree, however, that while the part of the Bill that deals with open data, or smart data, goes further than that and creates fresh opportunities for, in particular, the small challenger businesses of the kind she has described to take on the big incumbents that own the data lakes in many sectors, those possibilities will be greatly reduced if we take our time and move too slowly? Could it not potentially take 18 months to two years for us to start opening up those other sectors of our economy?

Julia Lopez: I am delighted, in turn, to hear my hon. Friend call me the Secretary of State—I am grateful for the promotion, even if it is not a reality. I know how passionate he feels about open data, which is a subject we have discussed before. As I said earlier, I am pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade is present, because this morning he announced that a new council will be driving forward this work. As my hon. Friend knows, this is not necessarily about legislation being in place—I think the Bill gives him what he wants—but about that sense of momentum, and about onboarding new sectors into this regime and not being slow in doing so. As he says, a great deal of economic benefit can be gained from this, and we do not want it to be delayed any further.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Let me first draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Let me also apologise for missing the Minister's opening remarks—I was taken by surprise by the shortness of the preceding statement and had to rush to the Chamber.

May I take the Minister back to the subject of compliance costs? I understand that the projected simplification will result in a reduction in those costs, but does she acknowledge that a new regime, or changes to the current regime, will kick off an enormous retraining exercise for businesses,

many of which have already been through that process recently and reached a settled state of understanding of how they should be managing data? Even a modest amount of tinkering instils a sense among British businesses, particularly small businesses, that they must put everyone back through the system, at enormous cost. Unless the Minister is very careful and very clear about the changes being made, she will create a whole new industry for the next two or three years, as every data controller in a small business—often doing this part time alongside their main job—has to be retrained.

Julia Lopez: We have been very cognisant of that risk in developing our proposals. As I said in my opening remarks, we do not wish to upset the apple cart and create a compliance headache for businesses, which would be entirely contrary to the aims of the Bill. A small business that is currently compliant with the GDPR will continue to be compliant under the new regime. However, we want to give businesses flexibility in regard to how they deliver that compliance, so that, for instance, they do not have to employ a data protection officer.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous with her time. May I ask whether the Government intend to maintain data adequacy with the EU? I only ask because I have been contacted by some business owners who are concerned about the possible loss of EU data adequacy and the cost that might be levied on them as a result.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pressing me on that important point. I know that many businesses are seeking to maintain adequacy. If we want a business-friendly regime, we do not want to create regulatory disruption for businesses, particularly those that trade with Europe and want to ensure that there is a free flow of data. I can reassure him that we have been in constant contact with the European Commission about our proposals. We want to make sure that there are no surprises. We are currently adequate, and we believe that we will maintain adequacy following the enactment of the Bill.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I was concerned to hear from the British Medical Association that if the EU were to conclude that data protection legislation in the UK was inadequate, that would present a significant problem for organisations conducting medical research in the UK. Given that so many amazing medical researchers across the UK currently work in collaboration with EU counterparts, can the Minister assure the House that the Bill will not represent an inadequacy in comparison with EU legislation as it stands?

Julia Lopez: I hope that my previous reply reassured the hon. Lady that we intend to maintain adequacy, and we do not consider that the Bill will present a risk in that regard. What we are trying to do, particularly in respect of medical research, is make it easier for scientists to innovate and conduct that research without constantly having to return for consent when it is apparent that consent has already been granted for particular medical data processing activities. We think that will help us to maintain our world-leading position as a scientific research powerhouse.

[Julia Lopez]

Alongside new data bridges, the Secretary of State will be able to recognise new transfer mechanisms for businesses to protect international transfers. Businesses will still be able to transfer data across borders with the compliance mechanisms that they already use, avoiding needless checks and costs. We are also delighted to be co-hosting, in partnership with the United States, the next workshop of the global cross-border privacy rules forum in London this week. The CBPR system is one of the few existing operational mechanisms that, by design, aims to facilitate data flows on a global scale.

World-class research requires world-class data, but right now many scientists are reluctant to get the data they need to get on with their research, for the simple reason that they do not know how research is defined. They can also be stopped in their tracks if they try to broaden their research or follow a new and potentially interesting avenue. When that happens, they can be required to go back and seek permission all over again, even though they have already gained that permission earlier to use personal data. We do not think that makes sense. The pandemic showed that we cannot risk delaying discoveries that could save lives. Nothing should be holding us back from curing cancer, tackling disease or producing new drugs and treatments. This Bill will simplify the legal requirements around research so that scientists can work to their strengths with legal clarity on what they can and cannot do.

The Bill will also ensure that people benefit from the results of research by unlocking the potential of transformative technologies. Taking artificial intelligence as an example, we have recently published our White Paper: “AI regulation: a pro-innovation approach”. In the meantime, the Bill will ensure that organisations know when they can use responsible automated decision making and that people know when they can request human intervention where those decisions impact their lives, whether that means getting a fair price for the insurance they receive after an accident or a fair chance of getting the job they have always wanted.

I spoke earlier about the currency of trust and how, by maintaining it through high data protection standards, we are likely to see more data sharing, not less. Fundamental to that trust will be confidence in the robustness of the regulator. We already have a world-leading independent regulator in the Information Commissioner’s Office, but the ICO needs to adapt to reflect the greater role that data now plays in our lives alongside its strategic importance to our economic competitiveness. The ICO was set up in the 1980s for a completely different world, and the pace, volume and power of the data we use today has changed dramatically since then.

It is only right that we give the regulator the tools it needs to keep pace and to keep our personal data safe while ensuring that, as an organisation, it remains accountable, flexible and fit for the modern world. The Bill will modernise the structure and objectives of the ICO. Under this legislation, protecting our personal data will remain the ICO’s primary focus, but it will also be asked to focus on how it can empower businesses and organisations to drive growth and innovation across the UK, and support public trust and confidence in the use of personal data.

The Bill is also important for consumers, helping them to share less data while getting more product. It will support smart data schemes that empower consumers and small businesses to make better use of their own data, building on the extraordinary success of open banking tools offered by innovative businesses, which help consumers and businesses to manage their finances and spending, track their carbon footprint and access credit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister always delivers a very solid message and we all appreciate that. In relation to the high data protection standards that she is outlining, there is also a balance to be achieved when it comes to ensuring that there are no unnecessary barriers for individuals and businesses. Can she assure the House that that will be exactly what happens?

Julia Lopez: I am always happy to take an intervention from the hon. Member. I want to assure him that we are building high data protection standards that are built on the fundamental principles of the GDPR, and we are trying to get the right balance between high data protection standards that will protect the consumer and giving businesses the flexibility they need. I will continue this conversation with him as the Bill passes through the House.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being so generous with her time. With regard to the independent commissioner, the regulator, who will set the terms of reference? Will it be genuinely independent? It seems to me that a lot of power will fall on the shoulders of the Secretary of State, whoever that might be in the not-too-distant future.

Julia Lopez: The Secretary of State will have greater powers when it comes to some of the statutory codes that the ICO adheres to, but those powers will be brought to this House for its consent. The whole idea is to make the ICO much more democratically accountable. I know that concern about the independence of the regulator has been raised as we have been working up these proposals, but I wish to assure the House that we do not believe those concerns to be justified or legitimate. The Bill actually has the strong support of the current Information Commissioner, John Edwards.

The Bill will also put in place the foundations for data intermediaries, which are organisations that can help us to benefit from our data. In effect, we will be able to share less sensitive data about ourselves with businesses while securing greater benefits. As I say, one of the examples of this is open banking. Another way in which the Bill will help people to take back control of their data is by making it easier and more secure for people to prove things about themselves once, electronically, without having to dig out stacks of physical documents such as passports, bills, statements and birth certificates and then having to provide lots of copies of those documents to different organisations. Digital verification services already exist, but we want consumers to be able to identify trustworthy providers by creating a set of standards around them.

The Bill is designed not just to boost businesses, support scientists and deliver consumer benefits; it also contains measures to keep people healthy and safe.

It will improve the way in which the NHS and adult social care organise data to deliver crucial health services. It will let the police get on with their jobs by allowing them to spend more time on the beat rather than on pointless paperwork. We believe that this will save up to 1.5 million hours of police time each year—

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Hear, hear.

Julia Lopez: I know that my hon. Friend has been passionate on this point, and we are looking actively into her proposals.

We are also updating the outdated system of registering births and deaths based on paper processes from the 19th century.

Data has become absolutely critical for keeping us healthy, for keeping us safe and for growing an economy with innovative businesses, providing jobs for generations to come. Britain is at its best when its businesses and scientists are at theirs. Right now, our rules risk holding them back, but this Bill will change that because it was co-designed with those businesses and scientists and with the help of consumer groups. Simpler, easier, clearer regulation gives the people using data to improve our lives the certainty they need to get on with their jobs. It maintains high standards for protecting people's privacy while seeking to maintain our adequacy with the EU. Overall, this legislation will make data more useful for more people and more usable by businesses, and it will enable greater innovation by scientists. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.26 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good finally to get the data Bill that was promised so long ago. We nearly got there in the halcyon days of September 2022, under the last Prime Minister, after it had been promised by the Prime Minister before. However, the Minister has a strong record of bringing forward and delivering things that the Government have long promised. I also know that she has another special delivery coming soon, which I very much welcome and wish her all the best with. She took a lot of interventions and I commend her for all that bobbing up and down while so heavily pregnant. I would also like to send my best wishes to the Secretary of State, who let me know that she could not be here today. I would also like to wish her well with her imminent arrival. There is lots of delivery going on today.

We are in the midst of a digital and data revolution, with data increasingly being the most prized asset and fundamental to the digital age, but this Bill, for all its hype, fails to meet that moment. Even since the Bill first appeared on the Order Paper last September, AI chatbots have become mainstream, TikTok has been fined for data breaches and banned from Government devices, and AI image generators have fooled the world into thinking that the Pope had a special papal puffer coat. The world, the economy, public services and the way we live and communicate are changing fast. Despite these revolutions, this data Bill does not rise to the challenges. Instead, it tweaks around the edges of GDPR, making an already dense set of privacy rules even more complex.

The UK can be a global leader in the technologies of the future. We are a scientific superpower, we have some of the world's best creative industries and now, outside

the two big trading blocs, we could have the opportunities of nimbleness and being in the vanguard of world-leading regulation. In order to harness that potential, however, we need a Government who are on the pitch, setting the rules of the game and ensuring that the benefits of new advances are felt by all of us and not just by a handful of companies. The Prime Minister can tell us again how much he loves maths, but without taking the necessary steps to support the data and digital economy, his sums just do not add up.

The contents of this Bill might seem technical—as drafted, they are incredibly technical—but they matter greatly to every business, consumer, citizen and organisation. As such, data is a significant source of power and value. It shapes the relationship between business and consumers, between the state and citizens, and much, much more. Data information is critical to innovation and economic growth, to modern public services, to democratic accountability and to transforming societies, if harnessed and shaped in the interest of the many, not simply the few—pretty major, I would say.

Now we have left the EU, the UK has an opportunity to lead the world in this area. The next generation of world-leading regulation could allow small businesses and start-ups to compete with the monopolies in big tech, as we have already heard. It could foster a climate of open data, enable public services to use and share data for improved outcomes, and empower consumers and workers to have control over how their data is used. In the face of this huge challenge, the Bill is at best a missed opportunity, and at worst adds another complicated and uncertain layer of bureaucracy. Although we do not disagree with its aims, there are serious questions about whether the Bill will, in practice, achieve them.

Data reform and new regulation are welcome and long overdue. Now that we have left the EU, we need new legislation to ensure that we both keep pace with new developments and make the most of the opportunities. The Government listened to some of the concerns raised in response to the consultation and removed most of the controversial and damaging proposals. GDPR has been hard to follow for some businesses, especially small businesses and start-ups, so streamlining and simplifying data protection rules is a welcome aim. However, we will still need some of them to meet EU data adequacy rules.

The aim of shifting away from tick-box exercises towards a more proactive and systematic approach to regulation is also good. Better and easier data sharing between public services is essential, and some of the changes in that area are welcome, although we will need assurances that private companies will not benefit commercially from personal health data without people's say so. Finally, nobody likes nuisance calls or constant cookie banners, and the moves to reduce or remove them are welcome, although there are questions about whether the Bill lives up to the rhetoric.

In many areas, however, the Bill threatens to take us backwards. First, it may threaten our ability to share data with the EU, which would be seriously bad for business. Given the astronomical cost to British businesses should data adequacy with the EU be lost, businesses and others are rightly looking for more reassurances that the Bill will not threaten these arrangements. The EU has already said that the vast expansion of the Secretary of State's powers, among other things, may

[Lucy Powell]

put the agreement in doubt. If this were to come to pass, the additional burdens on any business operating within the EU, even vaguely, would be enormous.

British businesses, especially small businesses, have faced crisis after crisis. Many only just survived through covid and are now facing rising energy bills that threaten to push them over the edge. According to the Information Commissioner,

“most organisations we spoke to had a plea for continuity.”

The Government must go further on this.

Secondly, the complex new requirements in this 300-page Bill threaten to add more hurdles, rather than streamlining the process. Businesses have serious concerns that, having finally got their head around GDPR, they will now have to comply with both GDPR and all the new regulations in this Bill. That is not cutting red tape, in my view.

Thirdly, the Bill undermines individual rights. Many of the areas in which the Bill moves away from GDPR threaten to reduce protection for citizens, making it harder to hold to account the big companies that process and sell our data. Subject access requests are being diluted, as the Government are handing more power to companies to refuse such requests on the grounds of being excessive or vexatious. They are tilting the rules in favour of the companies that are processing our data. Data protection impact assessments will no longer be needed, and protections against automated decision making are being weakened.

Rebecca Long Bailey: AlgorithmWatch explains that automated decision making is “never neutral.” Outputs are determined by the quality of the data that is put into the system, whether that data is fair or biased. Machine learning will propagate and enhance those differences, and unfortunately it already has. Is my hon. Friend concerned that the Bill removes important GDPR safeguards that protect the public from algorithmic bias and discrimination and, worse, provides Henry VIII powers that will allow the Secretary of State to make sweeping regulations on whether meaningful human intervention is required at all in these systems?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes two very good points, and I agree with her on both. I will address both points in my speech.

Taken together, these changes, alongside the Secretary of State’s sweeping new powers, will tip the balance away from individuals and workers towards companies, which will be able to collect far more data for many more purposes. For example, the Bill could have a huge impact on workers’ rights. There are ever more ways of tracking workers, from algorithmic management to recruitment by AI. People are even being line managed by AI, with holiday allocation, the assignment of roles and the determination of performance being decided by algorithm. This is most serious when a low rating triggers discipline or dismissal. Transparency and accountability are particularly important given the power imbalance between some employers and workers, but the Bill threatens to undermine them.

If a person does not even know that surveillance or algorithms are being used to determine their performance, they cannot challenge it. If their privacy is being infringed

to monitor their work, that is a harm in itself. If a worker’s data is being monetised by their company, they might not even know about it, let alone see a cut. The Bill, in its current form, undermines workers’ ability to find out what data is held about them and how it is being used. The Government should look at this again.

The main problem, however, is not what is in the Bill but, rather, what is not. Although privacy is, of course, a key issue in data regulation, it is not the only issue. Seeing regulation only through the lens of privacy can obscure all the ways that data can be used and can impact on communities. In modern data processing, our data is not only used to make decisions about us individually but pooled together to analyse trends and predict behaviours across a whole population. Using huge amounts of data, companies can predict and influence our behaviour. From Netflix recommendations to recent examples of surge pricing in music and sports ticketing, to the monitoring of covid outbreaks, the true power of data is in how it can be analysed and deployed. This means the impact as well as the potential harms of data are felt well beyond the individual level.

Moreover, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the algorithms that analyse data often replicate and further entrench society’s biases. Facial recognition that is trained on mostly white faces will more likely misidentify a black face—something that I know the parliamentary channel sometimes struggles with. AI language bots produce results that reflect the biases and limitations of their creators and the data on which they are trained. This Bill does not take on any of these community and societal harms. Who is responsible when the different ways of collecting and using data harm certain groups or society as a whole?

As well as the harms, data analytics offers huge opportunities for public good, as we have heard. Opening up data can ensure that scientists, public services, small businesses and citizens can use data to improve all our lives. For example, Greater Manchester has, over the years, linked data across a multitude of public services to hugely improve our early years services, but this was done entirely locally and in the face of huge barriers. Making systems and platforms interoperable could ensure that consumers can switch services to find the best deal, and it could support smaller businesses to compete with existing giants.

Establishing infrastructure such as a national research cloud and data trusts could help small businesses and not-for-profit organisations access data and compete with the giants. Citymapper is a great example, as it used Transport for London’s open data to build a competitor to Google Maps in London. Open approaches to data will also provide better oversight of how companies use algorithms, and of the impact on the rest of us.

Finally, where are the measures to boost public trust? After the debacle of the exam algorithms and the mishandling of GP data, which led millions of people to withdraw their consent, and with workers feeling the brunt but none of the benefits of surveillance and performance management, we are facing a crisis in public trust. Rather than increasing control over and participation in how our data is used, the Bill is removing even the narrow privacy-based protections we already have. In all those regards, it is a huge missed opportunity.

To conclude, with algorithms increasingly making important decisions about how we live and work, data protection has become ever more important to ensure that people have knowledge, control, confidence and trust in how and why data is being used. A data Bill is needed, but we need one that looks towards the future and harnesses the potential of data to grow our economy and improve our lives. Instead, this piecemeal Bill tinkers around the edges, weakens our existing data protection regime and could put our EU adequacy agreement at risk. We look forward to addressing some of those serious shortcomings in Committee.

6.40 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Bill. I am delighted that it finally takes advantage of one of the freedoms that has resulted from our leaving the European Union, which I supported at the time and continue to support. As has been indicated, the Bill has had a long gestation. I was the Minister at the time of the issue of the consultation paper in September 2021 and the Bill first appeared a year later. As the Opposition spokesman pointed out, a small hiccup delayed it a bit further.

Our current data protection laws originate almost entirely from the EU and are based on GDPR. Before the adoption of GDPR in 2016, the UK Government opposed parts of it. I recall that the assessment at the time was that, although there were benefits to larger companies, there would be substantial costs for smaller firms and indeed that has been borne out. There was a debate in government about whether we should oppose the GDPR regulation when it was going through the process of the Commission formation. As so often was the case in the EU, we were advised that, if we opposed that, we would lose vital leverage and our ability to influence its development. Whether we were able then to influence its development is arguable, but it was decided that we should not outright oppose it. However, it has always been clear that the one-size-fits-all GDPR that currently is in place imposes significant costs on smaller firms. When we had the consultation in 2021, smaller firms in particular complained about the complexity of GDPR, and the uncertainty and cost that it imposed. Clearly, there was seen to be an opportunity to streamline it—not to remove it, but to make it simpler and more understandable, and to reduce some of the burdens it imposes. We now have that opportunity to diverge.

The other thing that came back from the consultation—I agree with the Opposition Members who have raised this point—was that there is an advantage in the UK's retaining data adequacy with the EU. It was not taken for granted that we would get data adequacy. A lengthy negotiation with the EU took place before a data adequacy agreement was reached. As part of that process, officials rightly looked at what alternative there would be, should we not be granted data adequacy. It became clear that there are ways around it. Standard contractual clauses and alternative transfer mechanisms would allow companies to continue to exchange data. It would be a little more complicated. They would need to write the clauses into contracts. For that reason, there was clearly a value in having a general data adequacy agreement, but one should not think that the loss of data adequacy would be a complete disaster because, as I say, there are ways around it.

The Government are right to look at additional adequacy agreements with countries outside the EU, because therein lies a great opportunity. The EU has managed to conclude some, but not that many, and the Government have rightly identified a number of target countries where we see benefits from achieving data adequacy agreements. It is perfectly possible for us to diverge to a limited extent from GDPR and still retain adequacy. Notably, the EU recognises New Zealand's regime as being adequate, even though New Zealand's data protection laws are different from those of the EU. The fact that we decided to appoint the former New Zealand Information Commissioner as our own Information Commissioner means that he brings a particular degree of knowledge about that, which will be very useful.

In considering data protection law, it is sometimes said that there is a conflict between privacy—the right of consumers to have protection of their data—and the innovation and growth opportunities of technology companies. I do not believe that that is true; the two things have to be integral parts of our data protection laws. If people believe that their privacy is at risk, they will not trust the exchange of data. One problem is that, in general, people read only about the problems that arise, particularly from things such as identity theft, hacks and the loss of data as a result of people leaving memory sticks on phones or of cyber-criminals hacking into large databases and taking all their financial information. All those things are a genuine risk, but they present only one side of the picture and, in general, people reach their view about the importance of data protection according to all the risk, without necessarily seeing the real benefits that come from the free exchange of data. That was perhaps the lesson that covid showed us more than any other: by allowing the exchange of data, it allowed us to develop and research vaccines. We were able to research what worked in terms of prevention and the various measures that could be taken to protect consumers from getting covid. Therefore, covid was the big demonstration of the fact that data exchange can bring real benefits to all consumers. We are just on the threshold—

John Penrose: Further to my right hon. Friend's point about facilitating a trusted mechanism for sharing data, does he agree that the huge global success of open banking in this country has demonstrated that a trust framework not only makes people much more willing to exchange their data but frees up the economy and creates a world-leading sector at the same time?

Sir John Whittingdale: I agree with my hon. Friend on that. The use of smart data in open banking demonstrates the benefits that can flow from its use, and that example could be replicated in a large number of other sectors to similar benefit. I hope that that will be one benefit that will eventually flow from the changes we are making.

As I say, we are on the threshold of an incredibly exciting time. The use of artificial intelligence and automated decision making will bring real consumer benefits, although, of course, safeguards must be built in. The question of algorithmic bias was looked at by the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation and there was evidence there. Obviously, we need to take account of that and build in protections against it, but, in general, the opportunities that can flow from making data more easily available are enormous.

[Sir John Whittingdale]

I wish to flag up a couple of things. People have long found pop-up banner cookies deeply irritating. They have become self-defeating, because they are so ubiquitous that everybody just presses “yes”. The whole point of them was to acquire informed consent, but that is undermined if everybody is confronted by these things every time they log on to the internet and they automatically press “yes” without properly reading what they are consenting to. Restricting them to cookies that represent intrusive acquisition of data and explaining that to people and requiring consent is clearly an improvement. That will not only make data exchange easier but increase consumer protection, as people will know that they are being asked to give consent because they may choose not to allow their data to be used.

I understand the concerns that have been expressed about the Bill in some areas, particularly about the powers that will be given to the Secretary of State, but this is a complicated area. It is also one where technology is moving very fast. We need flexible legislation to keep up to date with the development of technology, so, to some extent, secondary legislation is probably the right way forward. We will debate these matters in Committee, but, generally, the Bill will help to deliver the Government’s declared intention, which is to make the UK the most successful data-driven technology economy in the world.

6.50 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We can all agree that the free flow of personal data across borders is essential to the economy, not just within the UK but with other countries, including our biggest trading partner, the EU. Reforms to our data protection framework must have appropriate safeguards in place to ensure that we do not put EU-UK data flows at risk.

Despite the Government’s promises of reforms to empower people in the use of their data, the Bill instead threatens to undermine privacy and data protection. It potentially moves the UK away from the “adequacy” concept in the EU GDPR, and gives weight to the idea that different countries can maintain data protection standards in different but equally effective ways. The only way that we can properly maintain standards is by having a standard across the different trading partners, but the Bill risks creating a scenario where the data of EU citizens could be passed through the UK to countries with which the EU does not have an agreement. The changes are raising red flags in Europe. Many businesses have spoken out about the negative impacts of the Bill’s proposals. Many of them will continue to set their controls to EU standards and operate on EU terms to ensure that they can continue to trade there.

According to conservative estimates, the loss of the adequacy agreement could cost £1.6 billion in legal fees alone. That figure does not include the cost resulting from disruption of digital trade and investments. The Open Rights Group says:

“Navigating multiple data protection regimes will significantly increase costs and create bureaucratic headaches for businesses.”

Although I understand that the Bill is an attempt to reduce the bureaucratic burden for businesses, we are now potentially asking those businesses to operate with two different standards, which will cause them a bigger

headache. It would be useful if the Government confirmed that they have sought legal advice on the adequacy impact of the Bill, and that they have confirmed with EU partners that the EU is content that the Bill and its provisions will not harm EU citizens or undermine the trade and co-operation agreement with the EU.

Several clauses of the Bill cause concern. We need more clarity on those that expand the powers of the Home Secretary and the police, and we will require much further discussion on them in Committee. Given what has been revealed over the past few months about the behaviour of some members of the Metropolitan police, there are clauses in the Bill that should cause us concern. A national security certificate that would give the police immunity when they commit crimes by using personal data illegally would cause quite a headache for many of us. The Government have not tried to explain why they think that police should be allowed to operate in the darkness, which they must now rectify if they are to improve public trust.

The Bill will also expand what counts as an “intelligence service” for the purposes of data protection law, again at the Home Secretary’s discretion. The Government argue that this would create a “simplified” legal framework, but, in reality, it will hand massive amounts of people’s personal information to the police. This could include the private communications as well as information about an individual’s health, political belief, religious belief or sex life.

The new “designation notice” regime would not be reviewable by the courts, so Parliament might never find out how and when the powers have been used, given that there is no duty to report to Parliament. The Home Secretary is responsible for both approving and reviewing designation notices, and only a person who is “directly affected” by a such a notice will be able to challenge it, yet the Home Secretary would have the power to keep the notice secret, meaning that even those affected would not know it and therefore could not possibly challenge it.

These are expansive broadenings of the powers not only of the Secretary of State, but of the police and security services. If the UK Government cannot adequately justify these powers, which they have not done to date, they must be withdrawn or, at the very least, subject to meaningful parliamentary oversight.

Far from giving people greater power over their data, the Bill will stop the courts, Parliament and individuals from challenging illegal uses of data. Under the Bill, organisations can deny or charge a fee to individuals for the right to access information. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned the difficulty he had with a constituent. I think we can all have some sympathy with that, because many of us have probably experienced similar requests from members of the public. However, it is the public’s right to have access to the data that we hold. If an organisation decides that these requests are “vexatious or excessive”, they can refuse them, but what is “vexatious or excessive”? These words are vague and open to interpretation. Moreover, charging a fee will create a barrier for some people, particularly those on lower incomes, and effectively restricts control of data to more affluent citizens.

The Bill changes current rules that prevent companies and the Government from making solely automated decisions about individuals that could have legal or

other significant effects on their lives. We have heard a lot about the potential benefits of AI and how it could be used to enhance our lives, but for public trust and buy-in of AI, we need to know that there is some oversight. Without that, there will always be a question hanging over it. The SyRI case in the Netherlands involved innocuous datasets such as household water usage being used by an automated system to accuse individuals of benefit fraud.

The Government consultation response acknowledges that, for respondents,

“the right to human review of an automated decision was a key safeguard”.

But despite the Government acknowledging the importance of a human review in an automated decision, clause 11, if implemented, would mean that solely automated decision making is permitted in a wider range of contexts. Many of us get excited about AI, but it is important to acknowledge that AI still makes mistakes.

The Bill will allow the Secretary of State to approve international transfers to countries with weak data protection, so even if the Bill does not make data security in the UK weaker, it will weaken the protections of UK citizens’ data by allowing it to be transferred abroad in cases with lower safeguards.

It is useful to hear a couple of stakeholder responses. The Public Law Project has said:

“The Data Protection and Digital Information (No.2) Bill would weaken important data protection rights and safeguards, making it more difficult for people to know how their data is being used”.

The Open Rights Group has said:

“The government has an opportunity to strengthen the UK’s data protection regime post Brexit. However, it is instead setting the country on a dangerous path that undermines trust, furthers economic instability, and erodes fundamental rights.”

Since we are talking about a Bill under the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, it is important to hear from the Royal Society, which says that losing adequacy with the EU would be damaging for scientific research in the UK, creating new costs and barriers for UK-EU research collaborations. While the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) is right about the importance of being able to share data, particularly scientific data—and we understand the importance of that for things such as covid vaccines—we need to make sure this Bill does not set up further hurdles that could prevent that.

There is probably an awful lot for us to thrash out in Committee. The SNP will not vote against Second Reading tonight, but I appeal to those on the Government Front Bench to give an opportunity for hon. Members to amend and discuss this Bill properly in Committee.

7.1 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I am delighted to speak in support of this long-awaited Bill. It is a necessary piece of legislation to learn the lessons from GDPR and look at how we can improve the system, both to make it easier for businesses to work with and to give users and citizens the certainty they need about how their data will be processed and used.

In bringing forward new measures, the Bill in no way suggests that we are looking to move away from our data adequacy agreements with the European Union.

Around the world, in north America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere in the far east, we see Governments looking at developing trusted systems for sharing and using data and for allowing businesses to process data across international borders, knowing that those systems may not be exactly the same, but they work to the same standards and with similar levels of integrity. That is clearly the direction that the whole world wants to move in and we should play a leading role in that.

I want to talk briefly about an important area of the Bill: getting the balance between data rights and data safety and what the Bill refers to as the “legitimate interest” of a particular business. I should also note that this Bill, while important in its own right, sits alongside other legislation—some of it to be introduced in this Session and some of it already well on its way through the Parliamentary processes—dealing with other aspects of the digital world. The regulation of data is an aspect of digital regulation; it is in some ways the fuel that powers the digital experience and is relevant to other areas of digital life as well.

To take one example, we have already established and implemented the age-appropriate design code for children, which principally addresses the way data is gathered from children online and used to design services and products that they use. As this Bill goes through its parliamentary stages, it is important that we understand how the age-appropriate design code is applied as part of the new data regime, and that the safeguards set out in that code are guaranteed through the Bill as well.

There has been a lot of debate, as has already been mentioned, about companies such as TikTok. There is a concern that engineers who work for TikTok in China, some of whom may be members of the Chinese Communist party, have access to UK user data that may not be stored in China, but is accessed from China, and are using that data to develop products. There is legitimate concern about oversight of that process and what that data might be used for, particularly in a country such as China.

However, there is also a question about data, because one reason the TikTok app is being withdrawn from Government devices around the world is that it is incredibly data-acquisitive. It does not just analyse how people use TikTok and from that create data profiles of users to determine what content to recommend to them, although that is a fundamental part of the experience of using it; it is also gathering, as other big apps do, data from what people do on other apps on the same device. People may not realise that they have given consent, and it is certainly not informed consent, for companies such as TikTok to access data from what they do on other apps, not just when they are TikTok.

It is a question of having trusted systems for how data can be gathered, and giving users the right to opt out of such data systems more easily. Some users might say, “I’m quite happy for TikTok or Meta to have that data gathered about what I do across a range of services.” Others may say, “No, I only want them to see data about what I do when I am using their particular service, not other people’s.”

The Online Safety Bill is one of the principal ways in which we are seeking to regulate AI now. There is debate among people in the tech sectors; a letter was published recently, co-signed by a number of tech executives, including Elon Musk, to say that we should have a

[Damian Collins]

six-month pause in the development of AI systems, particularly for large language models. That suggests a problem in the near future of very sophisticated data systems that can make decisions faster than a human can analyse them.

People such as Eric Schmidt have raised concerns about AI in defence systems, where an aggressive system could make decisions faster than a human could respond to them, to which we would need an AI system to respond and where there is potentially no human oversight. That is a frightening scenario in which we might want to consider moratoriums and agreements, as we have in other areas of warfare such as the use of chemical weapons, that we will not allow such systems to be developed because they are so difficult to control.

If we look at the application of that sort of technology closer to home and some of the cases most referenced in the Online Safety Bill, for example the tragic death of the teenager Molly Russell, we see that what was driving the behaviour of concern was data gathered about a user to make recommendations to that person that were endangering their life. The Online Safety Bill seeks to regulate that practice by creating codes and responsibilities for businesses, but that behaviour is only possible because of the collection of data and decisions made by the company on how the data is processed.

This is where the Bill also links to the Government's White Paper on AI, and this is particularly important: there must be an onus on companies to demonstrate that their systems are safe. The onus must not just be on the user to demonstrate that they have somehow suffered as a consequence of that system's design. The company should have to demonstrate that they are designing systems with people's safety and their rights in mind—be that their rights as a worker and a citizen, or their rights to have certain safeguards and protections over how their data is used.

Companies creating datasets should be able to demonstrate to the regulator what data they have gathered, how that data is being trained and what it is being used for. It should be easy for the regulator to see and, if the regulator has concerns up-front, it should be able to raise them with the company. We must try to create that shift, particularly on AI systems, in how systems are tested before they are deployed, with both safety and the principles set out in the legislation in mind.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend makes a strong point about safety being designed, but a secondary area of concern for many people is discrimination—that is, the more data companies acquire, the greater their ability to discriminate. For example, in an insurance context, we allow companies to discriminate on the basis of experience or behaviour; if someone has had a lot of crashes or speeding fines, we allow discrimination. However, for companies that process large amounts of data and may be making automated decisions or otherwise, there is no openly advertised line of acceptability drawn. In the future it may be that datasets come together that allow extreme levels of discrimination. For example, if they linked data science, psychometrics and genetic data, there is the possibility for significant levels of discrimination in society. Does he think that, as well as safety, we should be emphasising that line in the sand?

Damian Collins: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. In some ways, we have already seen evidence of that at work: there was a much-talked-about case where Amazon was using an AI system to aid its recruitment for particular roles. The system noticed that men tended to be hired for that role and therefore largely discarded applications from women, because that was what the data had trained it to do. That was clear discrimination.

There are very big companies that have access to a very large amount of data across a series of different platforms. What sort of decisions or presumptions can they make about people based on that data? On insurance, for example, we would want safeguards in place, and I think that users would want to know that safeguards are in place. What does data analysis of the way in which someone plays a game such as Fortnite—where the company is taking data all the time to create new stimuli and prompts to encourage lengthy play and the spending of money on the game—tell us about someone's attitude towards risk? Someone who is a risk taker might be a bad risk in the eyes of an insurance company. Someone who plays a video game such as Fortnite a lot and sees their insurance premiums affected as a consequence would think, I am sure, that that is a breach of their data rights and something to which they have not given any informed consent. But who has the right to check? It is very difficult for the user to see. That is why I think the system has to be based on the idea that the onus must rest on the companies to demonstrate that what they are doing is ethical and within the law and the established guidelines, and that it is not for individual users always to demonstrate that they have somehow suffered, go through the onerous process of proving how that has been done, and then seek redress at the end. There has to be more up-front responsibility as well.

Finally, competition is also relevant. We need to safeguard against the idea of a walled garden for data meaning that companies that already have massive amounts of data, such as Google, Amazon and Meta, can hang on to what they have, while other companies find it difficult to build up meaningful datasets and working sets. When I was Chairman of the then Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, we considered the way in which Facebook, as it then was, kicked Vine—a short-form video sharing app—off its platform principally because it thought that that app was collecting too much Facebook user data and was a threat to the company. Facebook decided to deny that particular business access to the Facebook platform. [Interruption.] I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), is nodding in an approving way. I hope that he is saying silently that that is exactly what the Bill will address to ensure that we do not allow companies with big strategic market status to abuse their market power to the detriment of competitive businesses.

7.11 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Bill has had a curious journey. It started life as the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, in search of the exciting Brexit opportunities that we were promised, only to have died and then arisen as the Data

Protection and Digital Information (No 2) Bill. In the Bill's rejuvenated—and, dare I say, less exciting—form, Ministers have rightly clawed back some of the most high-risk proposals of its previous format, recognising, of course, that our freedom from the European Union, at least in respect of data protection, is anything but. We may have left the European Union, but data continues to flow between the EU and the United Kingdom, and that means of course that we must keep the European Commission happy to maintain our adequacy decision. For the most part, the Bill does not therefore represent significant change from the existing GDPR framework. There are some changes to paperwork and the appointment of officers, but nothing radical.

With that settled—at least in my view—the question is this: what is the purpose of this Bill? The Government aim to reduce regulatory burdens on business. To give Ministers credit, according to the independent assessment of the Regulatory Policy Committee, they have adequately set out how that will happen—unlike for other Government Bills in recent weeks. I congratulate the Government on their so-called “co-design” with stakeholders, which other Departments could learn from in drafting legislation. But the challenge in reducing business regulation and co-designing legislation with stakeholders is knowing how much of an influence the largest, most wealthy voices have over the smallest, least influential voices.

In this Bill—and, I suspect, in the competition Bill as it relates to the digital markets unit, and, if rumours are correct, the media Bill—that means the difference between the voice of big tech and the voice of the people. If reports are correct, I share concerns about the current influence of big tech specifically on Downing Street and about the amount of interference by No. 10 in the drafting of legislation in the Department. *[Interruption.]* Ministers are shaking their heads; I am grateful for the clarification. I am sure that the reporters at *Politico* are watching.

Research is a good example of a concern in the Bill relating to the balance between big tech and the people. When I was on the pre-legislative committee of the Online Safety Bill—on which I enjoyed working with the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who spoke before me—everybody recognised the need for independent academics to have access to data from, the social media companies, for example, to help us understand the harms that can come from using social media. The Europeans have progressed that in their EU Digital Services Act, and even the Americans are starting to look at legislation in that area. But in the Bill, Ministers have not only failed to provide this access, but have opted instead to give companies the right to use our data to develop their own products. That means in practice that companies can now use the data they have on us to understand how to improve their products, primarily and presumably so that we use them more or—for companies that rely on advertising income—to increase our exposure to advertising, in order to create more profit for the company.

All that is, we are told, in the name of scientific research. That does not feel quite right to me. Why might Ministers have decided that that was necessary—a public policy priority—or that it is in any way in the interests of our constituents for companies to be able to do corporate research on product design without our explicit consent, instead of giving independent academics

the right to do independent research about online harms, for example? The only conclusion I can come to is that it is because Ministers were, in the co-design process, asked by big tech to allow big tech to do that. I am not sure that consumers would have agreed, and that seems to be an example of big tech winning out in the Bill.

The second example relates to consumer rights and the ability of consumers to bring complaints and have them dealt with in a timely manner. Clause 7 allows for unreasonable delays by companies or data controllers, especially those that have the largest quantities of data on consumers. In practice, that once again benefits big tech, which holds the most data. The time that it can take to conclude a complaint under the Bill is remarkably long and will merely act as a disincentive to bringing a complaint in the first place.

It can take up to two months for a consumer or data subject to request access to the data that a company holds on them, then another two months for the company to confirm whether a complaint will be accepted. If a complaint is not accepted, there will then be up to another six months for the Information Commissioner to decide whether the complaint should be accepted, and if the Information Commissioner does decide that, the company then has one more month to provide the data, which was originally asked for nine months earlier. The consumer can then look at the data and put in a complaint to the company. If the company does not deal with the complaint, the earliest that the consumer can complain to the Information Commissioner is month 14, and the Information Commissioner will then have up to six months to resolve the complaint. All in all, that is up to 20 months of emails, forms, processes and decisions from multiple parties for an individual consumer to have a complaint considered and resolved.

That lengthy and complex complaints process also highlights the risks associated with the provisions in the Bill relating to automated decision making. Under current law, fully autonomous decision making is prohibited where it relates to a significant decision, but the Bill relaxes those requirements and ultimately puts the burden on a consumer to successfully bring a complaint against a company taking a decision about them in a wholly automated way. Will an individual consumer really do that when it could take up to 20 months? In the world we live in today, the likes of Chat GPT and other large language models will revolutionise customer service processes. The approach in the Bill seems to fail in regulating for the future and, unfortunately, deals with the past. I ask again: which stakeholder group asked the Government to draft the law in this complex and convoluted way? It certainly was not consumers.

In other regulated sectors and areas of law, such as consumer law, we allow representative bodies to bring what the Americans call “class actions” on behalf of groups of consumers whose rights have been infringed. That process is perfectly normal and exists in UK law today. Experience shows that representative bodies such as Citizens Advice and Which? do not bring class actions easily because it is too financially risky. They therefore bring an action only when there is a clear and significant breach. So why have Ministers not allowed for those powers to exist for breaches of data protection law in the same way that the European Union has, when we are very used to them existing in UK law? Again, that feels like another win for big tech and a loss for

[Darren Jones]

consumers. Reducing unnecessary compliance burdens on business is of course welcome, but the Government seem to have forgotten that data protection law is based on a foundation of protecting the consumer, not being helpful to business.

On a different subject, I highlight once again the ongoing creep of powers being taken from Parliament and given to the Executive. We have already heard about the powers for the Secretary of State to make amendments to the legislation without following a full parliamentary process. That keeps happening—not just in this Bill but in other Bills this Session, including the Online Safety Bill. My Committee, which has whole-of-Government scrutiny powers in relation to good regulation, has reprimanded the Department—albeit in its previous form—for the use of those Henry VIII powers. It is disappointing to see them in use again.

The Minister, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), said that the Government had enhanced oversight of the Information Commissioner by giving themselves power to direct some of its legitimate interests or decisions, or the content of codes. I politely point out that the Information Commissioner regulates the Government's use of our data. It seems odd to me that the Government alone are being given enhanced powers to scrutinise the Information Commissioner, and that Parliament has not been given additional oversight; that ought to be included.

The Government have yet to introduce any substantive legislation on biometrics. Biometric data is the most personal type of data, be it about our faces, our fingerprints, our voices or other characteristics that are personal to our bodies. The Bill does not even attempt to bring forward biometric-specific regulation. My private Member's Bill in the 2019-21 Session—now the Forensic Science Regulator Act 2021—originally contained provisions for a biometrics strategy and associated regulations. At the then Minister's insistence, I removed those provisions, having been told that the Government were drafting a more wide-ranging biometrics Bill, which we have not seen. That is especially important in the light of the Government's artificial intelligence White Paper, as lots of AI is driven by biometric data. We have had some debate on the AI White Paper, but it warrants a whole debate, and I hope to secure a Westminster Hall debate on it soon. We need to fully understand the context of the AI White Paper as the Bill progresses through Committee and goes to the other place.

I am conscious that I have had an unusual amount of time, so I will finish by flagging two points, which I hope that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology will respond to in his summing-up. The first is the age-appropriate design code. I think that we all agree in this House that children should have more protection online than other users. The age-appropriate design code, which we all welcomed, is based on the foundation of GDPR. There are concerns that the changes in the Bill, including to the rights of the Secretary of State, could undermine the age-appropriate design code. I invite the Minister to reassure us, when he gets to the Dispatch Box, that the Government are absolutely committed to the current form of the age-appropriate design code, despite the changes in the Bill.

The last thing I invite the Minister to comment on is data portability. It will drive competition if companies are forced to allow us to download our data in a way that allows us to upload it to another provider. Say I wanted to move from Twitter to Mastodon; what if I could download my data from Twitter, and upload it to Mastodon? At the moment, none of the companies really allow that, although that was supposed to happen under GDPR. The result is that monopolies maintain their status and competitors struggle to get new customers. Why did the Government not bring forward provision for improved data portability in the Bill? To draw on a thread of my speech, I fear that it may be because that is not in the interests of big tech, though it is in the interests of consumers.

I doubt that I will be on the Bill Committee. I am sorry that I will not be there with colleagues who seem to have already announced that they will be on it, but I am sure that they will all consider the issues that I have raised.

7.22 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): This Bill provides us with yet another opportunity to ensure that our legal and regulatory frameworks are tailored to our needs and specifications, now that we are free from the confines of EU law. It is crucial that we have a data rights regime that maintains the high data protection standards that the public expect, but it must do so in a way that is not overly burdensome to businesses and public services, and does not stifle innovation, growth and productivity. The Bill will go a long way to achieving that, but I would like to focus on one small aspect of it.

Announcing the First Reading of the Bill, the Secretary of State stated that it would improve

"the efficiency of data protection for law enforcement and national security partners encouraging better use of personal data where appropriate to help protect the public. It provides agencies with clarity on their obligations, boosting the confidence of the public on how their data is being used."—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 20WS.]

That is a positive step forward for national security, but we are missing a crucial opportunity to introduce further reforms that will reduce administrative burdens on police forces across the UK.

I recently met members of the Leicestershire Police Federation, who informed me of the association's concerns regarding part 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018. Specifically, the Police Federation is concerned about how the requirements of part 3 interact with the Crown Prosecution Service's "Director's Guidance on Charging", which obliged the police to provide more information to the CPS pre-charge. That information includes unused material, digitally recovered material and third-party material, all of which must be redacted in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Combined, the guidance's requirements and the provisions of the Act represent a huge amount of administrative work for police officers, who would have to spend hours making the necessary redactions. Furthermore, much of that work may never be used by the CPS if no charge is brought, or the defendant pleads guilty before trial. Nationally, around 25% of cases submitted to the CPS result in no charge. This desk-based work would remove police officers from the frontline.

Picture the scene of an incident. Say that 10 police officers attend, all turning on their body cameras as they arrive. They deal with different aspects of the incident; they talk to a variety of people and take statements, standing in different positions that result in different backgrounds to the video footage and different side-conversations being captured. The lead officer then spends hours, if not days, redacting all the written data and video footage generated by all the officers, only for the redacted data to be sent to a perfectly trusted source, the CPS, which will not necessarily take the case forward.

The data protection Bill is meant to update and simplify the data protection framework used by bodies in the UK. The Bill refers to the work of the police in national security situations, but it should also cover their day-to-day work as a professional body. They should be able to share their data with the CPS, another professional body. Both have a legitimate interest in accessing and sharing the data collected. My hon. Friend the Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure will know that this is an issue, as I have already raised it with her. I am very grateful for her considered response, and for the Government's commitment to looking into this matter further, including in the context of this Bill, and at whether the Police Federation's idea of a data bubble between the police service and the CPS is a workable solution.

I look forward to working with the Government on the issue. It is vital that we do what we can to ease the administrative burden on police officers, so that we can free up thousands of policing hours every year and get police back to the frontline, where they can support communities and tackle crime. Speaking of easing burdens, may I also take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend the Minister the very best with the arrival that is expected in, I suspect, the none-too-distant future?

7.26 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My interest in this debate comes from my representing a science and research city, where data, and transferring it, is key, and from my long-term background in information technology. Perhaps as a consequence of both, back in 2018 I was on the Bill Committee that had the interesting task of implementing GDPR, even though, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones)—my good friend—pointed out at the time, none of us had the text in front of us. I think he perhaps had special access to it. In those long and complicated discussions, there were times when I was not entirely sure that anyone in the room fully gripped the complexity of the issues.

I recall that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) persistently called for a longer-term vision that would meet the fast-changing challenges of the digital world, and Labour Members constantly noted the paucity of resources available to the Information Commissioner's Office to deal with those challenges, notwithstanding yellow-vested people entering offices. Five years on, I am not sure that much has changed, because the Bill before us is still highly technical and detailed, and once again the key issues of the moment are being dodged.

I was struck by the interesting conversations on the Conservative Benches, which were as much about what was not being tackled by the Bill as what is being tackled

—about the really hot issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) mentioned in her Front-Bench speech, such as ChatGPT and artificial intelligence. Those are the issues of the moment, and I am afraid that they are not addressed in the Bill. I make the exact point I made five years ago: there is the risk of hard-coding previous prejudice into future decision making. Those are the issues that we should be tackling.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on data analytics, which is carrying out a timely review of AI governance. I draw Members' attention to a report made by that group, with the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West, called "Trust, Transparency and Technology". It called for, among other things, a public services licence to operate, and transparent, standardised ethics and rules for public service providers such as universities, police, and health and care services, so that we can try to build the public confidence that we so need. We also called for a tough parliamentary scrutiny Committee, set up like the Public Accounts Committee or the Environmental Audit Committee, to make sure the public are properly protected. That idea still has strong resonance today.

I absolutely admit that none of this is easy, but there are two particular areas that I would like to touch on briefly. One, which has already been raised, is the obvious one of data adequacy. Again, I do not feel that the argument has really moved on that much over the years. Many of the organisations producing briefings for this debate highlight the risks, and back in 2018—as I think the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) pointed out—there were genuine concerns that we would not necessarily achieve an adequacy agreement with the European Union. Frankly, it was always obvious that this was going to be a key point in future trade negotiations with the EU and others, and I am afraid that that is the way it has played out.

It is no surprise that adequacy is often a top issue, because it is so essentially important, but that of course means that we are weakened when negotiation comes to other areas. Put crudely, to get the data adequacy agreements we need, we are always going to be trading away something else, and while in my opinion the EU is always unlikely to withhold at the very end, the truth is that it can, and it could. That is a pretty powerful weapon. On the research issues, I would just like to ask the Minister whether, in summing up, he could comment on the concerns that were raised back in 2018 about the uncertainty for the research sector, and whether he is confident that what is proposed now—in my view, it should have been done then—can provide the clarity that is needed.

On a more general note, one of the key Cambridge organisations has pointed out to me that, in its view, it is quite hard to see the point of this Bill for organisations that are operating globally because, as the EU GDPR has extraterritorial effect, they are still going to need to meet those standards for much of what they do. It would simply be too complicated to try to apply different legal regimes to different situations and people. That is the basic problem with divergence: when organisations span multiple jurisdictions, taking back control is frankly meaningless. Effectively, it cedes control to others without having any influence—the worst of all worlds. That

[Daniel Zeichner]

organisation also tells me that it has been led to believe by the Government, as I think was echoed in some of the introductory points, that any organisation wishing to carry on applying current legal standards will, by default, meet those in the new Bill. It is sceptical about that claim, and it would like some confirmation, because it rightly wonders how that can be the case when new concepts and requirements are introduced and existing ones amended.

There is much, much more that could be said, has been said and will be said by others, including genuine concerns about the weakening of rights around subject access requests and some of the protections around algorithmic unfairness. Those need to be tested and scrutinised in Committee; frankly, too much cannot just be left to ministerial judgment. Huge amounts of data are now held about all of us, and the suspicion is rightly held that decisions are sometimes made without our knowledge, decisions that can have a direct impact on our lives. I think we can all agree that data used well can be transformative and a power for good, but that absolutely relies on confidence and trust, which in turn requires a strong regulatory framework that engenders that trust. It feels to me like this Bill fails to meet some of those challenges. It needs to be strengthened and improved.

7.32 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), and in fact, I have enjoyed listening to the various contributions about the many aspects of the many-headed hydra that the data Bill represents. In particular, the point made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) about interoperability and the one made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) about hurdles are points I will be returning to briefly.

I welcome the fact that we have a Bill that focuses on data. Data is the new oil, as they say, and it is essential that we grapple with the implications of that. If there is need of an example, data was critical in our fight against covid-19. Data enabled the rapid processing of new universal credit applications. Data meant that we could target funds into business accounts quickly to make sure that furlough payments were made. Data gave us regular updates on infection rates, and data underpinned the research into vaccines, their rapid roll-out, and their reporting to the right people, at the right time and in the right place. We have also seen that data on all those matters was questioned at every step of the way then and continuously since.

Data matters. This Bill matters: it gives us an opportunity to redefine our regulatory approach, as the hon. Member for Cambridge alluded to. It also provides a clearer and more stable framework for appropriate international transfers of personal data—I stress the word “appropriate”. In addition, it is welcome that the Bill extends data-sharing powers, enabling the targeting of Government services to support business growth more effectively and deliver joined-up public services, which will be the thrust of my contribution. I also welcome the Bill’s delivery of important changes to our everyday lives. Whether it is an increase in financial penalties for those behind nuisance calls, addressing the number of cookie pop-ups on web browsers

that we use every day, or providing a trusted framework for digital verification services, these are important updates in protecting everyday lives that are, in part, lived online now. That is to be welcomed—provided, again, that the necessary safeguards are in place.

I will give the bulk of my time to focusing on another area in which I think the Bill could go much further. The Bill recognises that, for public services to operate efficiently, safely and with effective scrutiny, data should be collected, presented, processed and shared in a consistent way, yet it is frustrating that the current scope of the Bill is for such information standards to apply in England only.

I am going to use health as an example to illustrate my point. In Aberconwy, we are experiencing severe, systematic failings in the delivery of health services across north Wales. The health board has been under special measures for six of the past eight years, and in their latest intervention, the Welsh Government have just sacked the non-executive members of the board. It therefore comes as little surprise that health is the No. 1 domestic concern for constituents across north Wales, or that my constituents put it into our plan for Aberconwy. This is not an exercise in point scoring, but in this Bill, I see an opportunity to help to tackle that problem. Wales is linked to the rest of the UK, historically and today, on an east-west axis for family, business, leisure and public services. Our health and social care services in north Wales rely on working and sharing information with colleagues in England—with hospitals in Chester, Stoke and Liverpool. However, sharing that data, which relies on the interoperability that the hon. Member for Manchester Central referred to, often presents an obstacle to care.

Of course, I recognise and respect that health is a devolved matter that is under the remit of the Welsh Government in Cardiff Bay, but one of the arguments made in favour of Welsh devolution 25 years ago was that it would enable learning from comparisons between different policy approaches across the UK, exposing underperformance as well as celebrating successes. In order to do so, though, we must have comparable and reliable data. If this sounds familiar, I made exactly that point in the debate on the Health and Care Bill back in November 2021. At that time, working with hon. Friends from across north Wales, we showed that we had overwhelming support from patients—they agreed that data must be shared. The healthcare professionals we spoke to also agreed that data needed to be shared. The IT experts we consulted with agreed that data must and could be shared, and the local administrators, community groups and civil servants we spoke to also told us that data needed to be shared. However, the reality is that currently, data in different parts of the UK is often not comparable, nor is the timing of its publication aligned.

Again, I have focused today on health as a pressing and urgent example of the need for sharing data, but these points apply across our public services. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) gave an excellent and powerful practical example of how data sharing within the police inadvertently introduces all sorts of unnecessary barriers. As much as I have spoken about health, these points apply equally to the education of our children, the wellbeing of our grandparents, skilling our workforce, levelling up our communities,

ensuring fair and competitive environments for business across the UK, and more—not least the future of our environment.

I repeat: good data is essential for good services. I recognise the good work that is going on in the Office for National Statistics, with the helpful co-operation of devolved Administrations, but it is time and an opportunity for the Government to consider amending the Bill in Committee to mandate agreement on, and the collection and publication of, key UK-wide data for public services. That data should be timely, accessible and interoperable.

All Administrations will already hold data for the operation of public services, but comparability and interoperability will allow professionals and planners to assign resources and guide interventions where they are needed most. It will allow patients and users of public services to make informed decisions about where to be treated, where to live and where to seek those services. It will also allow politicians like me to be held to account when services fail. I do not believe that such an amendment would divide the House in compassion or in common sense.

In conclusion, I know our Prime Minister understands the importance of data. He seeks to put it at the heart of a modern, innovative, dynamic and thriving UK, but it must be good data that flows through our veins and to all parts of our nation if it is to animate us and make the UK a success. For that reason, we need to go further. We need to ensure data comparability and interoperability across all parts of the UK. I look forward to hearing the Minister's closing remarks.

7.40 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I start by echoing the well wishes to the Secretary of State on her imminent arrival. I am delighted to be here in my first outing as the Lib Dem spokesperson for science, innovation and technology, although in my mind I consider it as the spokesperson for proud geeks. I appreciate that is not a term everyone likes, but as a physics graduate and an MP for Oxford, where we have many fellow-minded geeks, I am proud to call myself that.

Much as this important Bill is geeky and technical—it sounds like it will be an interesting Bill Committee—it integrates into our whole lives. People have spoken about the potential and progress, and I agree to an extent with the comment from the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) about this being the new oil. However, in the context of climate change, there is a lesson for us there. Imagine that we knew then what we know now. We can already see that here. As new as some of these technologies are, and as new as some of these challenges may be, it does feel like, as legislators, we are constantly playing catch-up with this stuff.

We consult and we look, and we know what the problems are and what the issue fundamentally is, but I agree with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) that we need a bit of vision here. I would argue that what we need is what my former colleague, the former Member for East Dunbartonshire, called for, which is a code of ethics for data and artificial intelligence. I sincerely hope that the Government, with the extra power to the elbow of the new Department, can put some real resource behind that—not in White Papers and thought, but in a

proper bit of legislation that answers some of the questions raised earlier about the moral use, for example, of artificial intelligence in war.

Those are important questions. The problem and worry I have is that this Government and others will find themselves constantly on the back foot, unless we talk not just about the geekery and the technical bits—by the sounds of it, there are enough of us in the House who would enjoy doing that—but about the slightly loftier and more important ways that this Bill will connect with society.

In the digital first age, the Government themselves are encouraging those who want to access benefits and every other part of the state to do so digitally. If someone is to be a full citizen of the state, they are required often to give over their data. If someone does not want to engage with the digital realm, it is difficult for them to access the services to which they are entitled. Those are some of the big issues that encircle this Bill. It is fair to make that point on Second Reading, and I urge the Government, and especially the new Department, to give serious thought to how they will knit this all together, because it is incredibly important.

The Liberal Democrats have a few issues with the Bill. I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), and in particular what he said in asking who is at the centre of the Bill, which is incredibly important. As liberals, we believe it should always be the citizen. Where there is a conflict of interest between the citizen, business and the state, in our view and in our political ideology, the citizen always comes top. I am not convinced that has been at the heart of the Bill at points. Citizens have been thought about, but were they at the centre of it at every stage? I am afraid that our ability as individuals to access, manipulate and decide who has our data has at various stages got lost.

The concerns we share with others are in four main areas: the Bill will undermine data rights; it will concentrate power with the Secretary of State—notwithstanding potential change in government, that is the sort of thing that Parliament needs to think about in the round, regardless of who is in power; the Bill will further complicate our relationship with Europe, as some have mentioned; and it sets a worrying precedent.

We need to understand where we start from. Only 30% of people in the UK trust that the Government use their data ethically. That means that 70% of people in the UK do not. Polls across the world have shown roughly the same thing. That is a huge level of mistrust, and we need to take it seriously. The Open Rights Group has described the Bill as part of a deregulatory race to the bottom, as the rights and safeguards of data subjects could be downgraded because of the changes proposed.

Clause 5 and schedule 1 to the Bill introduce a whole set of legitimate interests for processing data without consent and with few controls around their application. The Bill changes the definition of personal data, which would reduce the circumstances in which that information is protected. It reforms subject access requests, as others have said. We all run our own small businesses in our offices as MPs. We understand the burden placed on small businesses in particular, but it is absolutely the right of that individual to find out what is held on them in the way that subject access requests allow. If there is a conflict, it is the right of the individual that needs to be

[Layla Moran]

protected. The Government assess that the proposal would save about £82 a year—a price worth paying, given the number of consumers whom those businesses on average are looking after. There is an important hierarchy of user use that is not entirely captured by what the Government have been saying so far.

Big Brother Watch has said:

“The revised Data Protection and Digital Information Bill poses serious threats to Brits’ privacy. The Government are determined to tear up crucial privacy and data protection rights that protect the public from intrusive online surveillance and automated-decision making in high-risk areas. This bonfire of safeguards will allow all sorts of actors to harvest and exploit our data more than ever before. It is completely unacceptable to sacrifice the British public’s privacy and data protection rights on the false promise of convenience.”

I am deeply concerned that far from restoring confidence in data protection, the Bill sets a dangerous precedent for a future in which rights and safeguards are undermined. I have listened to what the Secretary of State has said at the Dispatch Box. I sincerely hope that those safeguards that the Government want to keep in place will remain in place, but we should be listening to those third-party groups that have scrutinised this Bill in some detail. There are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

My other concern is the concentration of power with the Secretary of State. As I have said before, while it would be lovely to think that all Secretaries of State and all Governments will all think the same on this and that we all have the same principles, my deep concern is that one day that will not happen. There is an important part for Parliament to play, especially when legislation is running behind what is happening in society, in raising the issues in real time. My worry is that by acting through secondary legislation, which we end up scrutinising less and less often, the Government do not have a mechanism for Parliament to feed in as society changes, which can be year-on-year. We need some way, whether through a Select Committee or whatever, to be able to keep pace with changes in society.

Finally, I want to talk about adequacy and in particular its loss being a real concern. I am pleased to hear that being raised on all sides in the House, which is a good sign, but I hope that this is not a case where little then gets changed in the Bill, as we have seen many times over. We could have it both ways: we can diverge from EU standards if we make the protection of the rights of the citizens stronger. Some who have mentioned divergence, however, have spoken about a weakening, which I worry will lead to a loss of adequacy.

In closing, will the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee to businesses that rely on it—and to our researchers who equally rely on it—that adequacy will not be watered down but will be one of the key tenets of how we move forward? Certainty for businesses and our researchers is incredibly important, and if there is any suggestion that changes in the Bill will affect that, they must be pulled immediately.

7.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to add some comments and make a contribution, and also to have heard all the right hon. and hon. Members’ speeches as I have sat here tonight. There will not be any

votes on the Bill, I understand, but if there had been, my party would have supported the Government, because I think the intention of the Minister and the Government is to try to find a correct way forward. I hope that some of the tweaking that is perhaps needed can happen in a positive way that can address such issues. It is always good to speak in any debate in this House, but this is the first one after the recess, and I am indeed very pleased to be a part of any debates in the House. I have spoken on data protection and its importance in the House before, and I again wish to make a contribution, specifically on medical records and protection of health data with regard to GP surgeries. I hope to address that with some questions for the Minister at the end.

Realistically, data protection is all around us. I know all too well from my constituency office that there are guidelines. There are procedures that my staff and I must follow, and we do follow them very stringently. It is important that businesses, offices, healthcare facilities and so on are aware of the guidelines they must follow, hence the necessity of this Bill. As I have said, if there had been a vote, we would have supported the Government, but it seems that that will not be the case tonight. Data exposure means the full potential for it to fall into the wrong hands, posing dangers to people and organisations, so it is great to be here to discuss how we can prevent that, with the Government presenting the legislation tonight and taking it through Committee when the time comes.

I have recently had some issues with data protection—this is a classic example of how mistakes can happen and how important data can end up in the wrong place—when in two instances the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority accidentally published personal information about me and my staff online. It did not do it on purpose—it was an accident, and it did retrieve the data very quickly—but it has happened on two occasions at a time of severe threat in Northern Ireland and a level of threat on the mainland as well. Although the matter was quickly resolved, it is a classic example of the dangers posed to individuals.

I am sure Members are aware that the threat level in Northern Ireland has been increased. Despite there being external out-of-office security for Members, I have recently installed CCTV cameras in my office for the security of my staff, which, though not as great in comparison, is my responsibility. I have younger staff members in their 20s who live on their own, and staff who are parents of young children, and they deserve to know that they are safe. Anxieties have been raised because of the data disclosure, and I imagine that many others have experienced something similar.

I want to focus on issues about health. Ahead of this debate, I have been in touch with the British Medical Association, which raised completely valid concerns with me about the protection of health data. I have a number of questions to ask the Minister, if I may. The BMA’s understanding of the Bill is that the Secretary of State or the Minister will have significant discretionary powers to transfer large quantities of health information to third countries with minimal consultation or transparent assessment about how the information will benefit the UK. That is particularly worrying for me, and it should be worrying for everyone in this House. I am sure

the Minister will give us some clarification and some reassurance, if that is possible, or tell us that this will not happen.

There is also concern about the Secretary of State having the power to transfer the same UK patients' health data to a third country if it is thought that that would benefit the UK's economic interests. I would be very disturbed, and quite annoyed and angry, that such a direction should be allowed. Again, the Minister may wish to comment on that at the end of the debate. I would be grateful if the Minister and his Department provided some clarity for the BMA about what the consultation process will be if information is to be shared with third-party countries or organisations.

There have also been concerns about whether large tech and social media companies are storing data correctly and upholding individuals' rights or privacy correctly. We must always represent our constituents, and the Bill must ensure that the onus of care is placed on tech companies and organisations to legally store data safely and correctly. The safety and protection of data is paramount. We could not possibly vote for a Bill that undermined trust, furthered economic instability and eroded fundamental rights. Safeguards must be in place to protect people's privacy, and that starts in the House today with this Bill. Can the Minister assure me and the BMA that our data will be protected and not shared willy-nilly with Tom, Dick and Harry? As I have said, protection is paramount, and we need to have it in place.

To conclude, we have heard numerous stories both from our constituents and in this place about the risks of ill-stored and unprotected data. The Bill must aim to retain high data protection standards without creating unnecessary barriers for individuals and businesses. I hope that the Minister and his Department can answer the questions we may have to ensure that the UK can be a frontrunner in safe and efficient data protection. We all want that goal. Let us make sure we go in the right direction to achieve it.

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

7.57 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I would like to add my best wishes to the Minister and the Secretary of State on their imminent arrivals.

We are in the midst of a tech revolution, and right at the centre of this is data. From social media and online shopping to the digitisation of public services, the rate at which data is being collected, processed and shared is multiplying by the minute. This new wealth of data holds great potential for innovation, boosting economic growth and improving the delivery of public services. The aims of the Bill to unlock the economic and societal benefits of data while ensuring strong, future-proofed privacy rights are therefore ones that we support. We welcome, for example, provisions to modernise the ICO structure, and we support provisions for the new smart data regimes, so long as there are clear requirements for impact assessments.

However, the Bill in its current form does not go far enough in actually achieving its aims. Its narrow approach and lack of clarity render it a missed opportunity to

implement a truly innovative and progressive data regime. Indeed, in its current form many clarifications will be needed to reassure the public that their rights will not be weakened by the Bill while sweeping powers are awarded to the Secretary of State. Currently, solely automated processing is defined by the Bill as one having "no meaningful human involvement" that results in a "significant decision", with the Secretary of State trusted with powers to amend what counts within this definition. The lack of detail on the boundaries of such definitions as well as their ability to change over time have concerned the likes of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the TUC.

The Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), outlined in his powerful speech the power imbalance between big tech and the people, which is an important insight and a challenge for us in this House. Indeed, just this month Uber was found to have violated the rights of three UK-based drivers by firing them without appeal on the basis of fraudulent activity picked up by its automated decision-making system. In its judgment, the court found that the limited human intervention in Uber's automated decision process was not

"much more than a purely symbolic act".

This case and the justice the drivers received therefore explicitly relied on current legislation in the form of article 22 of the UK GDPR, and a clear understanding of what constitutes meaningful human involvement. Without providing clear boundaries for defining significant decisions and meaningful human involvement, this Bill therefore risks removing the exact rights that won this case and creating an environment where vital safeguards, such as the right to contest automated decisions and request human intervention, could easily become exempt from applying at the whim of the Secretary of State. This must be resolved, and the public must be reassured that they will not be denied a job, mortgage or visa by an algorithm without a method of redress.

There is also a lack of clarity around how rules allowing organisations to charge a fee or refuse subject access requests deemed "vexatious" and "excessive" will work, as the likes of Which? and the Public Law Project have argued and which my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) highlighted. Indeed, if the list of circumstances where these terms might be met is non-exhaustive, what safeguards will be in place to stop controllers from abusing this, deciding that any request they dislike is vexatious? Organisations should absolutely be supported in directing resources to good faith requests, but we must be careful to ensure that any new limits are protected against abuse.

Reform of the responsibilities of the Information Commissioner's Office is another area in need of analysis. Indeed, more than evolving its structure, the Bill gives the Secretary of State power to set the strategic priorities of the regulator and approve codes of practice. This has sparked concern across the spectrum of stakeholders, from the Open Rights Group to techUK, over what it means for the regulator's independence. Given these new powers, particularly in cases where guidance addresses the activity of the Government, how can Ministers assure us that a Secretary of State will not be marking their own homework?

[Stephanie Peacock]

Whether it is the Secretary of State being able to amend the “recognised legitimate interests” list or the removal of the requirement for consultation on impact assessment, this same theme is echoed throughout the Bill, which was raised by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Without additional guidance and clear examples of how definitions apply, it is hard to grasp the full extent of the consequences of these new measures, especially given the sweeping powers of the Secretary of State to make further changes. We will look to ensure that this clarity is included in the Bill, so that everyone can be assured of their rights and of a truly independent regulator. We must also ensure that children are protected by the Bill and that the age-appropriate design code is not compromised, as raised by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and others across the House.

Clarity on the new regime is also vital for reassuring businesses who still have fears around losing EU adequacy, something raised throughout this debate and which the former Secretary of State the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) outlined in his contribution. The Government have said that they recognise that losing adequacy would be disastrous, costing up to £460 million as a one-off and £410 million every year afterwards. Ministers have rightly rowed back on many of the more concerning suggestions from their consultation, but they must be absolutely clear on how they are sure that the measures in the Bill, particularly those that toy with the regulator’s independence and give Ministers power to create further change, will not threaten adequacy.

Having already made significant adjustments to comply with UK GDPR, the changes in the Bill must also be careful not to create further uncertainty for businesses. Indeed, although Ministers say that anyone who abides by the current rules will still be compliant after the passing of the Bill, organisations will still have to do their own legal due diligence to understand how, if at all, this set of amendments impacts them. It would therefore be good to hear from Ministers on how they plan to ensure that businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, are supported in understanding the requirements on them.

We understand the Government’s attempts to future-proof this legislation, and it would be great to see an end to constant cookie banners or nuisance calls, which the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) referenced, but the measures in the Bill rely on technology that does not currently operationally exist. In the case of browser-enabled cookie models, there is also the concern that this may entrench power in the hands of existing tech giants and muddy the waters on liability. We must be careful, therefore, to ensure that businesses can actually implement what the Bill requires.

Ultimately, with the exception of the section on smart data, this Bill chooses to take a very narrow view of what an innovative data regime could look like. In the context of a rapidly changing world, this Bill was a great opportunity to really consider how we can get data working in better interests, like those of the general public or small businesses. Labour would have used a Bill like this to, for example, examine how data can empower communities and collective groups such as

workers in industries who have long felt that they have been on the wrong end of automated decision-making as well as the automation of jobs.

We would also have sought to improve public trust and understanding in how our data is used, particularly since the willingness to share data has been eroded after the likes of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the NHS data opt-out, and the exam algorithm scandal, which disproportionately affected my constituents in Barnsley. As it stands, however, the Bill seems only to consider data rights when they emerge as a side product of making changes to rules for processors. Data rights and data protection have wide-ranging consequences across society, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) discussed. Labour would have used this as an opportunity to look at the larger picture of data ownership. Deregulation measures such as those in the Bill might mean less work for some small businesses, but as long as a disproportionate amount of data is held by a limited number of firms, they will still be at a large competitive disadvantage. From introducing methods of collective redress to nurturing privacy-enhancing technologies, there are many positive opportunities a progressive data Bill could have explored to put our country at the forefront of innovation while genuinely strengthening rights and trust for the modern era, but the Government have missed this opportunity.

Overall, we can all agree on unlocking innovation through data while ensuring data subjects have the rights and trust they fundamentally deserve. However, there are many areas for clarity and improvement if this Bill is to match the bold vision required to truly be at the forefront of data use and data protection. I look forward to working closely with Ministers in the coming months towards legislation that better fulfils these aims.

8.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): I thank all Members for their contributions, including the hon. Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and for Aberconwy (Robin Millar). The debate has been held in the right spirit, understanding the importance of data, and I will try to go through a number of the issues raised.

Adequacy has come up on a number of occasions. We have been straight from the beginning that adequacy is very important and we work with the EU Commission on this; we speak to it on a regular basis, but it is important to note that the EU does not require exactly the same rules to be in place to be adequate. We can see that from Japan and from New Zealand, so we are trying to get the balance right and making sure that we remain adequate not just with the EU but with other countries with which we want to have data bridges and collaboration. We are also making sure that we can strip back some of the bureaucracy not just for small businesses, but for public services including GPs, schools and similar institutions, as well as protecting the consumer, which must always be central.

Automated decision-making was also raised by a number of Members. The absence of meaningful human intervention in solely automated decisions, along with opacity in how those decisions can be reached, will be mitigated by providing data subjects with the opportunity to make representations about, and ultimately challenge, decisions of this nature that are unexpected or seem unwarranted. For example, if a person is denied a loan or access to a product or services because a solely automated decision-making process has identified a high risk of fraud or irregularities in their finances, that individual should be able to contest that decision and seek human review. If that decision is found to be unwarranted on review, the controller must re-evaluate the case and issue an appropriate decision.

Our reforms are addressing the uncertainty over the applications of safeguards. They will clarify when safeguards apply to ensure that they are available in appropriate circumstances. We will develop that with businesses and other organisations in guidance.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West talked about joint-working designation notices and it is important to note that the police and intelligence services are working off different data regimes and that can make joint-working more difficult. Many of the changes made in this Bill have come from learning from the Fishmongers' Hall terrorist incident and the Manchester Arena bombing.

Members raised the question of algorithmic bias. We agree that it is important that organisations are aware of potential biases in data sets and algorithms and bias monitoring and correction can involve the use of personal data. As we set out in our response to the consultation on the Bill, we plan to introduce a statutory instrument that will provide for the monitoring and correction of bias in AI systems by allowing the processing of sensitive personal data for this purpose with appropriate safeguards. However, as we know from the AI White Paper we published recently, this is a changing area so it is important that we remain able to flex in Government in the context of AI and that type of decision-making.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West talked about biometrics. That is classed as sensitive data under the UK GDPR, so is already provided with additional protection. It can only be processed if a relevant condition is met under article 9 or schedule 1 of the Data Protection Act. That requirement provides sufficient safeguards for biometric data. There are significant overlaps in the current oversight framework, which is confusing for the police and the public, and it inhibits innovation. That is why the Bill simplifies the oversight for biometrics and overt surveillance technologies.

The hon. Gentleman talked about age-appropriate guidance. We are committed to protecting children and young people online. The Bill maintains the high standards of data protection that our citizens expect and organisations will still have to abide by our age-appropriate design code. Any breach of our data protection laws will result in enforcement action by the Information Commissioner's Office.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about data portability. The Bill increases data portability by setting up smart data regulations. He talked about social media, but it is far wider than that. Smart data is the secure sharing of customer data with authorised third parties on the customer's request. Those third parties can then use that data to provide innovative services for the consumer

or business user, utilising AI and data-driven insights to empower customer choice. Services may include clear account management across services, easier switching between offers or providers, and advice on how to save money. Open banking is an obvious live example of that, but the Bill, with the smart data changes within it, will turbocharge the use of this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough talked about policing. It will save 1.5 million police hours, but it is really important that we do more. We are looking at ways of easing redaction burdens for the police while ensuring we maintain victim and witness confidence. It is really important to them, and in the interests of public trust, that the police do not share information not relevant to a case with other organisations, including the Crown Prosecution Service and the defence. Removing information, as my hon. Friend says, places a resource burden on officers. We will continue to work with the police and the Home Office on that basis.

On UK-wide data standards, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy, improving access to comparable data and evidence from across the UK is a crucial part of the Government's work to strengthen the Union. The UK Government and the Office for National Statistics have an ongoing and wide-ranging work programme to increase coherency of data across the nations, as my hon. Friend is aware. We remain engaged in discussions and will continue to work with him, the Wales Office and the ONS to ensure that we can continue.

On international data transfer, it is important that we tackle the uncertainties and instabilities in the current regime, but the hon. Member for Strangford is absolutely right that in doing that, we must maintain public trust in the transfer system.

Finally, on the ICO, we believe that the Bill does not undercut its independence. It is really important that, for the trust issues I have talked about, we retain its independence. It is not about Government control over an independent regulator and it is not about a Government trying to exert influence or pressure for what are deemed to be more favourable outcomes. We are committed to the ICO's ongoing independence and that is why we have worked closely with the ICO. The Information Commissioner himself is in favour of the changes we are making. He has spoken approvingly about them.

This is a really important Bill, because it will enable greater innovation while keeping personal protections to keep people's data safe.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DATA PROTECTION AND DIGITAL INFORMATION (NO. 2) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 13 June 2023.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

**DATA PROTECTION AND DIGITAL
INFORMATION (NO. 2) BILL (MONEY)**

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, the Treasury or a government department, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

**DATA PROTECTION AND DIGITAL
INFORMATION (NO. 2) BILL
(WAYS AND MEANS)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees or levies under or by virtue of the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

**DATA PROTECTION AND DIGITAL
INFORMATION (NO. 2) BILL (CARRY-OVER)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)).

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Levelling-up Funding: Broomhill Pool

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

8.14 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to have such a vast amount of time in front of us for a very long debate covering many hours. No, we will of course try our best to keep it to half an hour.

This is a very important topic both to my constituents in Ipswich and to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Peculiarly enough, the entrance to Broomhill lido is in my hon. Friend's constituency, but the actual pool is in mine. It therefore covers both constituencies and is of benefit both to his constituents and to mine, in north-west Ipswich and across the town. In fact, when I go about knocking on doors and talking to residents across Ipswich, it is clear that this is not just an issue local to north-west Ipswich, but a town-wide issue. It is also, to an extent, a county-wide issue, as it would offer benefits to many people across Suffolk.

The Minister will know that Broomhill lido was a part of our levelling-up Get Ipswich Active bid. In terms of the money, it was quite a small proportion. The new Gainsborough sports centre bid was for around £15 million, while the Broomhill element was £2.8 million. So numerically it was a small portion, but actually, in terms of popular support and the difference that each project would make, I think Broomhill lido was very much an equal. It was therefore disappointing that we were not successful with the levelling-up bid. A number of people had worked very hard on formulating the bid and had got their hopes up that maybe this time, finally, we could get the project over the line. Sadly, that was not the case. However, we are here today and we feel as though the sums of money involved are significant but not unachievable. We feel as though in front of us there may well be a pathway to finally push the Broomhill lido project over the line and make it happen.

Broomhill lido was first opened in April 1938. Sadly, because of a structural survey in 1998, the decision was made at the end of the 2002 season to close the pool. Almost immediately, the Broomhill Pool Trust campaigned for it to be reopened. That campaign has lasted for over 20 years. Individuals connected with the trust, such as Mark Ling, deserve a huge amount of credit.

I must admit that I am here quite late in the day. My hon. Friend, who has served the people of Central Suffolk and North Ipswich for over 13 years, has had a much stronger involvement. To be perfectly honest, when I was first elected I thought it was a done deal. I thought the money was in place, it was fantastic and that it was going to happen. Unfortunately, the initial reconstruction work was due to start in April 2020. Obviously, covid hit and that impacted Fusion Lifestyle, the leisure company scheduled to spearhead the works and manage the lido once it reopened. With the inflationary pressures of covid and everything else, there is now a significant shortfall which means that, sadly, the project has not moved forward.

The lido is a great heritage asset. It is a grade II listed building. It is one of only 17 listed lidos in the country and the only listed lido in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk. I cannot say I have read all of Janet Smith's book

“Liquid Assets”, but I have seen one passage which refers to Broomhill lido as arguably the most impressive of its type in the country, right up there with Penzance, Tinside and Saltdean, so it has significant heritage value. Part of the plan would involve a heritage centre, which would enable people to learn more about its construction, architectural style and everything else associated with it.

On funding, approximately £7 million has been secured, but there is a shortfall of approximately £2.5 million. A few options are open to us, but I am certain that we will need Government support to provide us with some extra funding, whether through a community ownership fund or any other pots of money. The will is there locally. We thank the heritage lottery fund—my hon. Friend worked very hard to secure that initial £3.5 million loan. The fund are open to increasing their contribution, and it would be up to the borough council to make an application. I met the heritage lottery fund not too long ago to discuss this, and we thank them. There is the option of them giving more. We also have willing partners in both the borough council and Suffolk County Council, who are looking at what they can do to support this. But we believe that the Government’s explicit support to contribute towards the funding shortfall and their symbolic support are much needed.

On the benefits of reopening the Broomhill lido, what really triggered the application for the Get Ipswich Active levelling-up fund bid was the startling statistic that, sadly, the Ipswich borough area is the eighth least active in the country in terms of physical activity levels. Clearly, any opportunities to invest in infrastructure to help tackle that, such as this outdoor lido, would be very welcome. There are also the mental health benefits of everyone taking part in this activity. There is the heritage aspect. There is the way in which it connects with what we have to do to tackle issues with gangs in Ipswich, to give young people something positive to do and to believe in. This would do that.

When I have discussed this issue with many constituents, I have been struck by the emotions that come out. So often they have memories of going to the lido as a child, and there is love for it. On the face of it, it might just seem like an outdoor swimming pool, but to many people on an emotional level it means so much more. Support from the Government would speak both to the Government’s commitment to, belief in and ambition for Ipswich, and to the renaissance of our town, to get on the front foot. The Government’s support would be very much welcome.

There is also the point that if we were to do nothing, quite frankly this site would become a liability. Because of its protected heritage—it is a listed building—there are obligations on the borough council for its upkeep. Were the building to deteriorate further, the consequent cost for the borough council would be in the millions. It is also a protected area, so there would be cost implications as a result of that. Doing nothing comes with an associated cost. To me, having got so close—way over halfway there—it would be a travesty to allow it to slip through our fingers just when we could realise its potential.

I will take this opportunity to talk about sporting infrastructure more widely. I must say that this is my No. 1 priority at the moment. Last week I had the pleasure of visiting Northgate athletics club, which has been the home of Ipswich Harriers athletics club since

the end of the 19th century. Many famous athletes have started off there and gone on to represent Team GB. It has a disability team that also relies on the facility. It is also after around £400,000 to help resurface a track. Again, after this debate I will be making that campaign, because I passionately believe in the benefits of investing in first-class sporting infrastructure, whether that be lidos or athletics tracks. We have to invest in those facilities on so many different levels, for physical health, mental health and to give all people—particularly young people—something positive to be part of and to aspire to.

It is important to realise that over the last 30 years, around 30 pools have closed in Ipswich. That is a sign of the decline. This would be an opportunity to start reversing that decline, and to start putting some momentum behind it. I pay tribute to all those who have done the work to get us where we are, which is basically on the brink, in a positive sense: my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, and the Broomhill Pool Trust and all the volunteers associated with it, who have done a huge amount of work to assemble the evidence and the documentation. I would add the councillors of Castle Hill, who over a number of years have been hugely supportive.

I am cautiously optimistic that we can be successful. I am coming in at the end of the process and so seek to claim no credit for it. This is something that should have been done. The work should have started in April 2020. Negative fate has meant that we are here still campaigning to get it reopened. I hope I can play a small role in pushing this project over the line. It is a remarkable architectural facility, and I would love the Minister to visit it to see it for herself. If she did, I think she would see its immense potential and why it means so much to so many people.

I have been speaking for just over 11 minutes, so I will now call it quits and hand over to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, who will make an incredibly eloquent furthering of the points that I have been trying to make about why this is so necessary and beneficial for the people of Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, and Ipswich as a whole.

8.25 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) on securing this debate. In my 13 years serving my constituents and the people of Suffolk in this House—he is right about that—I have had three constituency neighbours. The first two were wildly different heights—one of small stature and one of very tall stature. Given the vigour with which my hon. Friend has taken forward the issue of Broomhill since he was elected, he is second to none in stature. It is pleasing for me, having been ploughing a lone furrow in this place and locally as a constituency MP, to have the tremendous support of my hon. Friend to push this matter forward. We are close—that is certainly true. A lot of progress has been made. There has been commitment from the borough council and the heritage lottery fund. We now hope to secure some additional county council funding to get this project over the line.

Broomhill pool is held in great regard by many people across Suffolk. It has been a pool in which Olympians have trained and families have enjoyed their summers. It is a well-loved community place. Unfortunately, for the

[Dr Dan Poulter]

last 20 years it has been effectively serving as a museum to its past glories, but we now have a real chance of getting this project over the line. Unfortunately, during the covid pandemic, when we were on the verge of breaking ground and getting the project delivered, inflationary costs across the economy rose, particularly in building costs and materials, which affected the viability of the Broomhill project.

As my hon. Friend said, we have a shortfall of £2.5 million, and I am hopeful that, through different sources, we can make that funding up. I am hopeful that the heritage lottery fund may be able to recognise those inflationary pressure and put more money forward. We are hopeful that the county council may find some money from its Ipswich fund—we are grateful to Councillor Paul West, the Ipswich portfolio member, for his work. We are also hopeful that there may be some money, even a small amount, that we can bid for from the Government to help get this project over the line. My hon. Friend mentioned the community fund. If there is a few hundred thousand pounds we could bid for, that could make all the difference in helping to get Broomhill reopened and re-established as the important community resource the people of Ipswich need.

Not only do we want to reopen the lido for the community, but we want to put it on a sustainable footing. With Fusion Lifestyle involved, we believe we have a partner organisation that will help to do exactly that—not just reopen the lido, but have a medium and long-term plan in place to ensure the facility will remain open and be enhanced for the benefit of the whole Ipswich community, in the months and years ahead.

Our asks to the Minister are, first, for her and the Government to bring to bear all the influence they can to support our wider effort for funding and, secondly, to help us to identify what pots of Government money may be available to bid for. When we undoubtedly bid for that for Broomhill, we hope she will look on those funding requests with favourable eyes as they come across her desk.

In conclusion, I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich on securing the debate. The opportunity to air these issues in this place is long overdue. I am delighted that we now have two Members of Parliament in Ipswich who are fighting for the future of Broomhill pool. If we continue to work together with the local community and the Broomhill Pool Trust, and with some support from the Government, the county council and the Heritage Lottery Fund, hopefully, we can get this over the line.

8.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for securing the debate. I congratulate him on doing so, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) on his passionate contribution. Both my hon. Friends have been, are, remain and will long be tireless advocates for Ipswich and for Suffolk. They are both deeply committed to championing projects that improve the quality of life

of local residents, and create new and exciting opportunities those residents can benefit from. That very much extends to the Broomhill lido, which we have heard about today.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich for bringing the project to my attention some months ago, not least given it is a beautiful art deco building—that is my favourite architectural style—and for raising the project in the House again today, ensuring it is firmly on the mind of Government. I thank him sincerely for his continued support in helping to bring the pool back into use for the benefit and enjoyment of residents. I also thank local residents involved with the Broomhill Pool Trust for the incredible work they have done in bringing it back into use.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich shares the Government's view that sport and physical activity have a central role to play in our levelling-up agenda, particularly in tackling the health inequalities that persist across the UK today. That was clear in the "Get Ipswich Active" bid to the levelling-up fund, which he mentioned.

The data on health outcomes in this country is particularly stark. On average, people living in the most deprived communities in England have over 18 years less of their lives in good health than those living in the least deprived areas. Frankly, we should all feel shocked by that fact, because health cannot and should not be a postcode lottery. That is why the Government are committed to improving outcomes for people across the UK, from young people growing up in Ipswich to older adults living in Inverness.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich will know, in the levelling-up White Paper, we set a 2035 target of raising healthy life expectancy by five years, while narrowing the healthy life expectancy gap in areas where it is most pronounced by 2030. One year on from that paper's publication, we remain equally committed to those goals and we are making real progress towards them.

Good health is, in many ways, the essence of levelling up. It allows people, wherever they live, to enjoy fulfilling, happy and productive lives. We can all agree that for too long geographic disparities have been a barrier to good health for many people. There are many factors behind the geographic divide. Access to and quality of health services vary dramatically by area, as does the quality of housing and the availability of affordable, healthier food. As today's debate has shown, access to high-quality sports facilities in places such as Ipswich is another factor fuelling health inequalities in this country.

Many well-loved pools, gyms and leisure centres have been under considerable pressure for some time now. Covid-19 had a profound impact on the sports and leisure sector, forcing many well-loved, vital local facilities to restrict their services or, sadly, to close entirely. The current cost of living pressures have exacerbated that trend, with rising energy costs squeezing sports facilities even further.

The last thing we want to see is pools and leisure centres forced to close their doors to the very people who need them most. That is why we announced £60 million of new funding for public swimming pools in England in the spring Budget. That much-needed funding will not only help swimming pool providers with the immediate cost pressures of high energy bills, but allow facilities to invest in energy-efficient renovations, making them more

sustainable in the long term. The funding will keep the doors open—and, in some places, the wave machines on—at pools across the country. Importantly, it will mean that communities can continue to access the facilities that they depend on for their physical and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich mentioned, mental health.

Our work does not stop there. Whether someone is a keen swimmer, a gymnast or a five-a-side footballer, we all know that physical activity has much wider benefits for society than the obvious health merits. Sporting activities bring people together, as we saw when the Lionesses united the country in support of their incredible victory. They create a sense of pride in place and they reduce social isolation, all the while providing skills and jobs that boost the economy.

Local leaders all over the country know that investing in sport and physical activities will bring much wider benefits for their communities. I am glad to see places using their town deal funding to support people in getting and staying active. From establishing a multimodal green travel route in Carlisle to delivering a new multi-purpose sport and leisure hub in Stevenage, I am pleased to see places prioritising their residents' health and wellbeing in their town deal projects.

Ipswich is no exception. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich knows, his constituency has been awarded £25 million from the towns fund, with a portion of that funding earmarked for health and wellbeing initiatives across Ipswich. Some £3.75 million of Ipswich's allocation is being used to transform a former waterfront silo building into a new leisure complex that, once finished, will become home to the UK's highest external climbing wall—exactly the type of forward-thinking, multi-use regeneration project that the towns fund is proud to support.

In addition, £1.31 million of the towns fund allocation will be put towards a new pedestrian and cycle bridge at Ipswich waterfront, improving active travel access in the town and enabling a circular route across the picturesque marina for the first time in Ipswich's history. A further £1.96 million will be spent on the Greener Ipswich project, which will link the waterfront to the town centre, encouraging more walking and cycling throughout the town and opening up new green spaces along the way.

Taken together, this package of projects will have a real, measurable impact on the health and wellbeing of people living in Ipswich. This is true levelling up in action, and I for one am excited to see these projects coming forward for my hon. Friend's constituents. I thank him for all his hard work to bring them to fruition.

While I am certainly encouraged by the Government's progress to date in tackling health inequalities and boosting wellbeing, it is clear to me that there is still a

long road ahead. Health inequalities still persist across the UK, and too many people's health and wellbeing remain dictated largely by where they live. That has to change, but I am confident that it will. We have the support of brilliant local leadership and dedicated community champions and politicians such as my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich. I understand that they are due to meet officials in my Department soon to explore possible funding options to bridge the funding gap; I will certainly support them in that endeavour and am happy to meet them separately to discuss the matter.

I love getting offered visits in this Chamber, because it is a place where I absolutely cannot say no. I am very happy to visit Ipswich to come and see the lido in person, as well as to see the incredible benefits of the towns fund projects that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich has been working so hard to support.

Tom Hunt: I really want to re-emphasise the importance of that visit, because actually going to the lido made a big difference for me. Anyone who visits the building and the old café can see its beauty and see the potential for the new café and the fitness suite: it is a beautiful building, even when it is not in use. I cannot underline enough how much my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and I, along with the pool trust, would welcome the Minister.

Dehenna Davison: I am very grateful for those warm words. I am giving my officials in the Box the nod to make a note that we will definitely come and visit, not least so that I can see at first hand the incredible art deco architecture, which is my favourite style. I am very excited to see it.

There is an important takeaway from today's debate, in which we have heard about the potential benefits of Ipswich's Broomhill lido. When we talk about billions or millions being invested, we need to remember that local projects that may seem small through a national lens really are at the very heart of communities. These projects are huge for local residents: I do not think it an overstatement to say that they can and do change lives. As we move ahead with our levelling-up missions in the months and years ahead, it is vital that we keep local communities and local priorities, such as saving the Broomhill lido, very much at the heart of what we do.

Question put and agreed to.

8.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 17 April 2023

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response: International Agreement

4.30 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 614335, relating to an international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Sharma. I first want to thank the petitioners for their campaign. The petition has received more than 156,000 signatures, and is therefore something that this House should rightly discuss. The petitioners ask that the Government commit to not signing any international treaty on pandemic prevention and preparedness established by the World Health Organisation unless it is approved through a public referendum.

In their response to the petitioners, back in May 2022, the Government stated:

“To protect lives, the economy and future generations from future pandemics, the UK government supports a new legally-binding instrument to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.”

They finished their response with,

“This process of ratification allows scrutiny by elected representatives of both the treaty and any appropriate domestic legislation in accordance with the UK’s constitutional arrangements. The Government does not consider a referendum is necessary, appropriate or in keeping with precedent for such an agreement.”

As I always do when leading a petitions debate, I shall set out my role here today. I lead these debates, not because I have specifically asked to do so, or because I agree with the subject matter, but simply because it is my duty as a member of the Petitions Committee to take a number of debates each Parliament. I want that to be very clear.

In that capacity, I cover a variety of subjects and, as all my Committee colleagues will agree, I am superbly supported by the staff who assist the members of the Petitions Committee. I always believe that the Petitions Committee typifies democracy at its best and am therefore honoured to stand here and debate the views of a percentage of our nation’s people on a specific subject. Today is no different.

I will begin with some information on the World Health Organisation. The WHO was established in 1948 and is the United Nations agency on health. Its headquarters are in Geneva. It has 194 member states grouped into six regions. Its website states that it “leads global efforts to expand universal health coverage and...coordinates the world’s response to health emergencies.”

One of the WHO’s many success stories is the eradication of smallpox. It has worked in many areas across the globe in sexual and mental health. It has worked towards the eradication of polio. It helps across developing countries with the provision of clean water, and helps against the effects of climate change and earthquakes—the list goes on and on.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and for highlighting both smallpox and polio. Is the fact of the matter not that it has been a worldwide vaccination programme that has enabled us to achieve that? Does that not demonstrate the falseness of the anti-vax campaigns?

Nick Fletcher: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution. I do believe that the World Health Organisation should be proud of an awful lot of the work that it has done. More recently, the outbreak of covid has brought many questions about the WHO and I would suggest that that is one of the main reasons that we are debating how the WHO can protect our population today.

A question that I believe should always be asked of any organisation is, “How is it funded?” The WHO gets 20% of its funding from member states as assessed contributions, but 80% then comes from voluntary contributions. That is, again, from member states that wish to give more, but also from the private sector and philanthropists.

What can the WHO do at present, and what does the treaty want to achieve? Through international health regulations, the WHO is alerted to potential events, and can then give guidance to members. There is a legally binding agreement that directs nations on what they need to do in a public health crisis. International health regulations were crafted in 1969 and amended in 2005, and they outline each member’s responsibility. However, these are not really legally binding. From what I understand, the WHO has no real power. Members can choose to ignore what the WHO says. It suggests, rather than tells, a country what it should do. It has no real enforcement powers; all it can do is highlight those countries that do not follow guidance.

Through the treaty, it is now proposed that the WHO would be able to police its powers to motivate a country into doing what its officials believe is necessary. Some countries do not want this to happen, and the petitioners do not want the UK to agree to it without a referendum. Why is that the case? The petitioners believe that those sorts of powers should be sovereign. They do not like the fact that WHO officials are unelected. They do not like the fact that some members pay in more money than others, and could therefore have more influence on decisions. They also feel the same about philanthropists and pharmaceutical companies that make contributions.

Are the petitioners over-concerned? In the treaty there is a change of language from “should” to “must”, but is the WHO only doing its job of protecting our population? There appears to be nothing about lockdowns in the treaty, which that is one of the biggest concerns of the petitioners. The next question is what policing member states would look like. It would probably mean sanctions—services or resources being withheld. Would that only affect the smaller countries? Would that really bother the superpowers? Would it really bother the members that are paying in the most money? Each question leads to another.

That leads me to another part of the petition: maybe a referendum is required. I genuinely do not believe in referenda. I was elected to stand here, educate myself on the various topics that come before this House, and make decisions on my constituents’ behalf. It is a position of privilege, and involves a lot of reading, but that is an important part of the position. Our constituents have

[Nick Fletcher]

their own jobs to do, and therefore do not have the time, nor the ease of access to information, that we have in this place.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is right that he is elected by his constituents to speak on their behalf. But when it comes to the matter of sovereignty, surely it lies with the people? Like me, the hon. Gentleman is only a custodian of that sovereignty for a brief period of time, after which it must be returned intact to the people who elected him so that they can elect someone else if necessary. When it comes to giving sovereignty away, that has to go back to the people and it requires a referendum. The people will decide whether they wish to give their sovereignty away.

Nick Fletcher: I thank the hon. Gentleman and I will now come on to his point. Is holding a referendum the right tool for now? We had one in Scotland; this was widely accepted on all sides to be a once-in-a-generation referendum. Those who lost have ever since pushed for another referendum. The same happened over Brexit; it consumed the nation. Referendums are divisive; they polarise positions and leave a lasting legacy of division. Whether a referendum is appropriate is for the Government to decide, and if they think it is, they must make all the facts known. I suggest that petitioners, while playing their part in the education process, must do so in a sensible manner. I have no time for conspiracy theories.

There is a push for the WHO to gain policing powers over pandemic responses, and our Government need to seriously look into that, as at least 156,000 people are concerned enough to have signed the petition. They are not alone in their concern. As I have already stated, some countries have said that they will not sign the treaty. Are they right to do so? Whatever our politics may be, we should always be careful when handing over such powers to an organisation that can be influenced by nations other than ours. Questions about whose agenda the WHO takes will be asked, and it should be prepared with answers if they are to quell the concerns of many of the voices speaking on this subject.

In summary, the WHO does some wonderful work. Covid has proved what devastation a pandemic can bring. There will no doubt be another at some point, and we need that global perspective. We are a global community, therefore what happens here can soon have a bearing on a country across the globe. The petitioners are essentially asking whether an unelected organisation should have the power to sanction countries such as the UK if they do not wish to comply. Do we have no real choice but to comply, and should the UK sign up to this treaty without a referendum? I look forward to hearing the position of other Members and the Government.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they want to speak.

4.41 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I had intended to make only a few interventions, but when there were initially very few people in the Chamber, I decided to make a brief contribution.

Part of this argument has been about vaccination. We go back to Dr Wakefield and that appalling piece of chicanery that was the supposed impact of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, which has now been completely exposed and discredited. He is now Mr Wakefield and no longer a recognised doctor. Considerable damage was done not just in the UK but across the globe, with large numbers of parents worried about the MMR vaccine and then their children not having it. Suddenly, a disease that had been almost entirely eradicated decades ago—measles—started to spread, with a considerable impact on the health of many children.

We have already discussed how polio has been almost entirely eliminated, and how smallpox appears—one must always be conditional with this—to have been eliminated by vaccination. However, there is the poisonous cesspit of the right-wing conspiracy theorist ecosystem in the United States. I am a huge supporter of our alliance with the US, but within it there is an appalling subculture of those who live by conspiracy theories. The anti-vaccine campaign is one of those, with a detrimental impact on health. That obviously then fed into covid.

We already have international bodies dealing with some issues. With the influenza vaccine, when this year's variation appears in the southern hemisphere, the international committee then gets together to understand the basic structure, and then informs the vaccine companies in the northern hemisphere. We then all produce that in order to fight it. Very occasionally, the committee gets that wrong, but most of the time it gets it right, which has a huge impact on both the health of individuals and the health service.

This is about international scientific co-operation. The covid vaccine was an exact demonstration of how international co-operation enabled us to produce a vaccine within something like 12 months instead of the normal 10 years. That is a great contribution to health and to stabilising the situation.

There is an argument for referenda on major constitutional issues. For example, it was perfectly right to put the proposal to change the voting system in this country to the public, and the public very sensibly turned that down. By the way, I do not think that anybody should try to change the voting system without a referendum. When the argument about our relationship with the EU could not be resolved here in Parliament, it was perfectly proper to have a referendum, and the people decided on that. We cannot be arguing to have one for every bloomin' issue, every policy and every treaty. We are signatories to hundreds of treaties around the world.

Andrew Bridgen: Has the right hon. Gentleman read the pandemic treaty proposed by the WHO, and has he read the amendments to the international health regulations that have to be looked at alongside that very important document?

John Spellar: The request was for a treaty to be drawn up—it has not been finalised yet—under the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Is that what we are talking about? This is going into fantasy land. Unfortunately, as we saw during the pandemic, the ability to get coherence across countries, even to move vaccines, is difficult and

there is a need to move at speed. This was a covid pandemic, but it could equally have been an avian influenza pandemic. Indeed, there are a huge number of similarities.

Andrew Bridgen: The right hon. Gentleman says there is a need to move at speed. Does he agree that Pfizer moved at the speed of science, to the effect that it never even tested whether the vaccine actually stopped transmission or contraction of the virus? This House mandated people to lose their jobs for not taking a vaccine that was unproven and unsafe, and that was actually never going to stop them transmitting the virus.

John Spellar: It certainly was not unproven or unsafe, and it had a huge beneficial impact across the world. Unfortunately, we have some people—a very limited number, but we all get letters on this issue—who wallow in the realm of conspiracy theories. Indeed, we have just had another example.

The point I was making is that we sign trade treaties. We signed up to the World Trade Organisation, which binds us to certain forms of arbitration. We have just signed a treaty with Australia as well. All these treaties bring obligations. That is part of engaging with the world, unless we want to be North Korea and have a policy for hermits.

We have also had reference to major pharmaceutical companies. There are criticisms of them in some other areas, but the mobilisation of their intellectual power and production capacity, in producing a vaccine in record time to stem the tide of covid, was absolutely magnificent. So too was the support from one of the great villains of conspiracy theories, Bill Gates, whose foundation has done a huge amount of work in trying to eliminate tropical diseases, which is often little noticed but has a huge impact on tens of millions of people, especially children, in Africa and other areas.

What we are seeing is overreaction and hysteria, and I would argue that we should give the petition a firm rejection, as I am sure we would do if it ever came to the Floor of the House of Commons. We should support international co-operation for international health.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next Member, I will make two points. First, interventions should be brief. Secondly, those who wish to give a speech should refrain from making interventions and let other Members come in. Otherwise, we will run out of time. I call Danny Kruger.

4.48 pm

Danny Kruger (Devises) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Sharma. I am grateful to be called, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for introducing the debate and all the petitioners who have brought this very important matter to the House. I am pleased to see so many colleagues present, which suggests to me that we should be debating this matter on the Floor of the House. I hope we will do so in due course, as I will explain.

I also thank the organisation UsforThem, which I have been working with on this and other matters. It is the campaign group that led the calls on behalf of children and young people during the lockdowns, and it is now very concerned about what the WHO's proposal might mean for the most vulnerable people in our society.

I acknowledge the impulse behind the treaty and the proposals that are before the World Health Organisation. I acknowledge that global threats that defy borders require global co-operation, and it is certainly true to say that this country was not sufficiently prepared for the pandemic when it broke out, but I do not believe that the lack of readiness was due to a lack of international co-operation. Indeed, the degree of international co-operation was astonishing. The lack of readiness was in the ordinary business of contingency planning by the British state—the security of supply of equipment, capacity in the health service, and our ability to support the vulnerable and the isolating. That is where we were not ready.

In fact, we could say that in a crucial respect the UK was prepared. We thought that we knew what we would do in the event of a pandemic. We would introduce targeted isolation and targeted protection of the most vulnerable—the application of personal responsibility, not mass lockdowns, which were not part of the plan—but we threw that plan aside immediately, and we went for exactly what everybody else around the world was doing. Or almost everyone—never forget plucky Sweden.

During covid-19, we had an excess of global collaboration and not enough independence—and certainly not enough parliamentary scrutiny. That is why I am concerned about the treaty and what lies beneath it. The treaty would create, via amendments to international health regulations, the infrastructure and funding to implement changes that are being planned anyway. Those amendments are of greater concern. The proposed new regulations would hardwire into international law and our domestic policy a top-down approach to pandemics and global public health. Yes, we need co-operation and strategic vision, but no, we do not need ever more centralised solutions.

In this country, the top-down approach to covid-19, from the centralised test and trace system to food parcels for the isolated, did not work. What worked best was people taking responsibility for themselves and their neighbours, local government working with civil society, medical leaders exercising their judgment, and public servants at the local level working flexibly and with initiative. What worked was not central control but subsidiarity: decisions being taken as close as possible to the people that they affected.

John Spellar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about tracking and tracing people, for which there was already an established infrastructure, but surely vaccines, for example, can be done only at a national and international level.

Danny Kruger: I am all for international collaboration, including in the development of vaccines, but no, what we need is more independent development of medical devices and treatments. In fact, it was a race between different countries that led to the vaccine programme. We have a high degree of international collaboration at the medical level, and I am not sure that we need more.

[*Danny Kruger*]

What we now see is the World Health Organisation setting itself up as responsible not just for identifying pandemics but, crucially, for the worldwide responses to those pandemics. The proposed amendments recognise the WHO as the guiding and co-ordinating authority of international responses to public health emergencies of international concern. Of course, we know the WHO's unaccountable nature: the director general is appointed through an opaque, non-democratic process, and international pharmaceutical companies have too much power.

The regulations propose the creation of a vast public health surveillance mechanism at public expense; if the WHO itself is anything to go by, that would be substantially funded by the pharmaceutical industry. Crucially, as my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley said, the regulations propose that the WHO's existing powers to make recommendations about what countries should do be upgraded from non-binding to binding. That amounts to a vast transfer of power to the WHO.

What would the new regulations enable? They would enable legally binding obligations on countries to mandate financial contributions to fund pandemic-response activities. They could require the surrender of intellectual property in technologies. They could mandate the manufacture and international sharing of vaccines. They could override national safety approval processes for vaccines, gene-based therapies, medical devices and diagnostics.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the ability to react to covid in an agile way, which was possible only with our having exited the European Union, enabled us to invest in, procure and then roll out the vaccine that saved millions of lives? As he has stated in his—as usual—eminently sensible speech, that should be a model for moving forward.

Danny Kruger: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is certainly the case that the best aspects of the British Government's response were those that we were able to undertake using our own sovereignty.

The WHO's powers will potentially extend to ordering countries to close borders; to travel restrictions; to the tracing of contacts; to refusal of entry; to forced quarantining; to medical examinations, including requirements for proof of vaccination; and even to the forced medication of individuals. It is not just when a pandemic has already been declared that those powers might be invoked: the WHO claims these powers when there is simply the potential for such an emergency.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I am puzzled by this debate. I cannot understand whether it is actually a debate about constitutional procedure in the House of Commons and whether we want more referenda—I would have thought we had had enough of those. The UK is the second-largest contributor to the WHO. It is a member-led process. It is not an organisation that we are bit-part players in, or one where we are going to be directed and overrun. We cede sovereignty through membership of organisations. We cede the sovereignty to go to war by being a member of NATO. It is a member-led process which, as I understand it, is to ensure that we are at the heart of preventing, better preparing for and designing how we respond to, future disease outbreaks. To me, that seems perfectly logical.

As the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, I say that we want to be at the heart of scrutinising any future treaty that we negotiated as a member state through the WHO. It would then go through the processes of this House before any ratification took place. Is that not the point of the House of Commons?

Danny Kruger: My hon. Friend makes an important suggestion with which I absolutely agree. He is not totally right about the way the WHO works, of course. A simple majority of member states can approve the new regulations, and a two-thirds majority can approve the treaty. Even if we objected to it, it could still go ahead. We would then have the opportunity to opt out, which is what I suggest we do.

I will come to why we absolutely should opt out. I am challenging the proposed regulations and treaty, because they are wholly and fundamentally wrong, and they represent an assault on our freedoms. We should object. I think the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) is absolutely right: fundamentally, Parliament needs to exercise its own responsibility and duty to oversee what we are going to do.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): To colleagues who like this treaty, is the easy answer not that we will, of course, remain members of the WHO, read its advice and accept that advice where we wish? Why should we have to accept advice when the WHO may get it wrong, and we can do nothing about it because it decides, not us?

Danny Kruger: That is absolutely right. We have the opportunity to say no, and it is an opportunity we need to take. Once we have said yes, we are then under the obligation to introduce, potentially, terrible infringements on liberty. I will make some more progress and then let Members intervene.

My final concern about the proposals is that they set the WHO up as the single source of truth on pandemics and responses to pandemics. There is a legitimate and understandable need to challenge misinformation and disinformation—there is a real danger there—but surely Members should recognise that there is an opposite danger as well, whereby a single supranational agency becomes the sole source of information on what is true. These are the people who said that covid-19 definitely did not come from a lab leak at the Wuhan institute, as now seems likely. These are the people who said that lockdowns would only be short and temporary, rather than lasting the best part of two years, and who said that vaccines stopped transmission, rather than having next to no impact on transmission. They said that vaccines would only be for the vulnerable, rather than everyone—including little babies. They said the vaccines would be voluntary, rather than mandated as they were in many countries, including, very nearly, our own. I do not have confidence in the WHO and its satellites to be the single source of truth on either the science or the response.

I will finish with some observations. As I mentioned, the international health regulations are an existing legal instrument, so they need only a majority of member states at the World Health Assembly in order to come into force. We then have six months to opt out of them. A treaty would require the support of two thirds of member states. I am concerned about the Government's response to this petition, which said that they “support a new international legally-binding instrument”.

The Government are therefore in favour of something along the lines of the proposed treaty. They went on to say:

“Not every treaty requires implementing legislation and it is too early to say if that would apply here.”

At the moment, we do not have a commitment from the Government that they would bring the proposals to Parliament, which is very concerning.

Margaret Thatcher warned in a speech in Bruges in 1988 that the UK had not helped to defeat the Soviet Union just to subject itself to a new supranational arrangement: the European Union, as it became. We did subject ourselves to the EU until our current time, and I suggest that we did not leave the EU just to subject ourselves to a new supranational arrangement in the form of the WHO. Some may find that comparison ludicrous, as they find any defence of national sovereignty ludicrous—accept in the case of Scotland. They say that in our interconnected world we need less sovereignty and more co-operation, which means more power for people who sit above the nation states. I say that in the modern world we need nation states more than ever, because only nation states can be accountable to the people, as the WHO is not. Only nation states can temper their policy to the particular circumstances of the people, as the WHO cannot. Only nation states have the legitimacy and agility to adapt to the huge threats and opportunities of our times, as the WHO cannot.

I firmly believe that the treaty and the regulations are another, greater threat to parliamentary sovereignty. It is not clear whether the Government will submit the treaty and the regulations to parliamentary approval, but I believe they should, and I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

5 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Sharma. This debate is incredibly important. It raises issues about sovereignty but also delves into far broader issues that we have touched on already.

I am under no illusions as to why the petition has received such a large number of signatures: because of what has been suggested could be in the treaty. While doing research for this debate, I found a broad range of concerns, some of which are entirely reasonable and others that are completely absurd. On the absurd side, a narrative has been created that the World Health Organisation is a body intent on world domination. Borrowing tropes from conspiracy theories, I found one website referring to the WHO as “globalists” that

“drain our resources, serve our enemies, and continue working to establish a global dictatorship over everyone and everything.”

That sentiment is clearly ludicrous, as is the reference to the WHO being owned by Bill Gates or the Chinese Government.

The reality is far more mundane than the narrative spun. The first key point to remember is that nothing has yet been agreed. The treaty is being negotiated as we speak by, among others, representatives of the United Kingdom. It cannot be viewed as being imposed on us when we are helping to develop it. It is also important to note that it was our Prime Minister at the time who was one of the signatories to the statement of intent to instigate the discussions.

Steve Brine: As a former health Minister with responsibility for the WHO, I worked with the organisation. It is supranational, but it is 100% driven by its members and we, as the second largest donor and one of its founding members, are one of the most respected members round the table, so we are designing the process. We should be proud of that. We are at the heart of that and we should submit it to scrutiny by us in this House. Does the hon. Member not agree?

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, who has a great deal of experience in this area. As a country, we are leaders in the field. We should be proud of our role in creating the WHO and fighting the pandemics that have happened in recent years. It is also the case that, as with all treaties, there is an opportunity for parliamentary intervention. That is already established, and the Government have committed that any subsequent domestic regulations would need to be passed before the treaty was ratified.

As we have already heard, we can, if we so decide, opt out, so there is no question that this is something that will be done to us. As a sovereign nation we have the opportunity to say no. Given the amount of time that this House has spent debating questions of national sovereignty over the past five or six years, would we do something that would give away sovereignty? There are important principles about parliamentary accountability that we need to bear in mind. It would be unfair to allow some of the wilder conspiracy theories to overshadow legitimate concerns about any potential infringement on our sovereignty and democracy.

On the specifics of the treaty, as I have said already, the key point to note is that it has not been finalised yet, but we do know the broad parameters of negotiations set out in the latest “zero draft” published in February. From that we can see that the guiding mission is:

“to prevent pandemics, save lives, reduce disease burden and protect livelihoods, through strengthening, proactively, the world’s capacities for preventing, preparing for and responding to, and recovery of health systems from, pandemics.”

I would be very surprised if anyone objected to that as a set of guiding principles, but it is reasonable to ask what the definition means in practice, what the procedure is for declaring a pandemic, and what safeguards will be in place to ensure individual liberty and rights are protected.

Those questions and that ambiguity have been seized upon by those who want to undermine global co-operation. They state fears that the treaty will restrict freedom of speech to the extent that dissenters could be imprisoned, that it will impose instruments that impede on our daily life and that it will institute widespread global surveillance without warning and without the consent of world leaders. In other words, some of the hallmarks of totalitarian Governments are to be combined with supercharged lockdown measures, which are all, of course, already in the power of the Government under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984. Under this treaty, those things will apparently be done without our Government having a say.

If those claims had any basis in fact, we would all be rightly concerned, but they do not stand up to scrutiny. Fact checkers have consistently stated that the

[Justin Madders]

WHO would have no capacity to force members to comply with public health measures. A WHO spokesperson said:

“As with all international instruments, any accord, if and when agreed, would be determined by governments themselves, who would take any action while considering their own national laws and regulations.”

The idea that we would allow our citizens to be imprisoned by a third party for expressing an opinion on something in this country is absurd. It is just not going to happen. We live in a liberal democracy and I know that Members from across the House are determined to keep it that way. It is those nations that want to undermine western liberal democracies and to create disarray that are pushing the narrative that there is an unaccountable, unelected, global group of people seeking to take control of our lives.

We can both protect our values of freedom and democracy and work more closely with other countries in the face of a global threat. Those two aims can be entirely consistent with one another. Creating a global treaty is an entirely reasonable and responsible course of action. One of the most important messages to emerge from covid-19 was that we need to be better prepared for the next pandemic. We have learned that global co-operation is crucial to success, whether that is by co-ordinating measures to suppress transmission or conducting vaccine roll-outs. It took the world far too long to understand that in a pandemic no one is safe until everyone is safe.

To my mind, the question is much more about whether this Parliament and this Government are up to the task of dealing with another public health emergency in a way that ensures that democratic accountability and public confidence are maintained. As someone who spent many hours dealing with public health regulations during the covid pandemic, I think there is much to be done to improve Parliament's role. We know that, at times, decisions had to be taken quickly, but far too often covid regulations were debated weeks or even months after they were introduced. As the pandemic progressed, I felt that no effort was being made to ensure that regulations were debated before they came into force. On numerous occasions, there was no objective reason why that needed to be case. Indeed, sometimes the rules were made publicly available on the Government website only minutes before they became law. Trying to obtain clarity about which measures, individually or collectively, were considered likely to lead to an increase or decrease in transmission rates was mission impossible.

When we were able to see the minutes of meetings of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—in the early stages of the pandemic, we were not—there was often very little correlation between them and the measures being debated. Sometimes, there was no statement in the explanatory memorandum that the measures being put forward in the regulations had even been considered by a scientific adviser. Often, there were no SAGE minutes that stated that these matters had been considered either. Often, what SAGE recommended did not even make it into regulations.

I am sure that many of us can remember the contradictions and the confusion about some of the measures: around why an area was in a particular tier, the lack of clarity about how areas moved in and out of tiers, the decision to close pubs—

John Redwood: I am glad the hon. Gentleman agrees that we needed better parliamentary scrutiny and more options for the handling of the pandemic but, given that that is the case, how on earth does it make sense to give away powers to an international quango, which will then instruct future Ministers to do these things, with Parliament being told that it has no right to talk about it or to vote on it?

Justin Madders: If that was how it was going to proceed, I would agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I do not believe that is the case. Any Government Member concerned about parliamentary sovereignty and scrutiny would not have voted for the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which has put thousands of laws into the hands of Ministers without any parliamentary accountability.

Let me return to the question of how the last pandemic was dealt with. There were other examples of decisions being made seemingly without any evidence to back them up—the decision to close pubs at 10 o'clock is a good example—and there was also the lack of coherence about why people were allowed to meet in groups of not more than six and why certain establishments could reopen and some could not. It was a fast-moving and unprecedented situation but, given the draconian nature of the regulations, we needed to be better at parliamentary scrutiny than we were. The release of the WhatsApp messages of the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), has certainly given me food for thought. Perhaps not all the decisions were made on a scientific basis.

If we find ourselves amidst another pandemic in which measures that affect people's daily lives are proposed, this place's ability to openly scrutinise and question Government on decisions before they are made, as well as its access to the full scientific advice, will be vital. If decisions are taken transparently and—dare I say it—if everyone is seen to be following the rules, we stand a much better chance of maintaining public confidence that the measures are necessary.

There has been a bit of talk about vaccine harms today. I do not want to be seen as unfairly critical of those who have raised those concerns. I understand that sometimes there is a deep desire for a rational explanation for the sudden loss of a loved one. I also believe that we should be able to ask legitimate questions about vaccines: it is perfectly reasonable to debate who should receive a vaccine and how often they should receive it. It is also legitimate to scrutinise Government decisions, particularly ones that impinge on individual liberty. But there is a world of difference between doing that and descending into the dark world of conspiracy theories that suggest that vaccines do more harm than good. That risks pushing people away from potentially life-saving interventions and, over the long term, damaging the public's perception of the importance of a tool that has been used to eradicate diseases that frequently ruined lives. From smallpox to tuberculosis and polio, vaccines have saved millions of lives over the years. We cannot now abandon the importance of that work because of a few videos on YouTube. We need to be able to challenge and question, of course, but we should not ignore what decades of experience have shown us about the value of vaccinations.

The treaty has nothing to do with Bill Gates, and it is not the first step in creating a world-dominating authoritarian state. I do not believe that it will even

impede our sovereignty. It will enable the combined efforts of our brilliant researchers, medics and scientists jointly to tackle the increased threat that we face from pandemics. We achieve far more as a species when we work together. The far bigger risk to our continued existence on this planet is not the so-called great reset, but a descent into paranoia and distrust, such that we avoid using our brightest and best, they end up working in silos, and they do not share their knowledge and efforts collectively. We want to avoid that. From pandemics to climate change and eradicating global poverty, we face many challenges as a species, some of which are existential. If we do not seek to work together to meet those challenges, we will ultimately all be the worse off for it.

5.13 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Sharma. In March 2021, a group of world leaders announced an initiative for a new treaty—a convention on pandemic preparedness and response. The initiative was taken to the World Health Organisation to be negotiated, drafted and debated by a newly established intergovernmental negotiation body. The petition that resulted in today's debate was signed by over 156,000 people, of whom 441 are my constituents—just under 0.4% of my constituents. That is the third highest number; only Wells and Wealden constituencies have a higher number of residents who signed the petition. They want the Government to commit not to sign any international treaty on pandemic prevention and preparedness established by the WHO unless it is approved through a public referendum. It is important that their concerns are listened to and answers provided.

The idea behind the treaty is to ensure that there is a more joined-up approach to pandemics in future. There is no question but that the world will face other pandemics and health emergencies in the future. It is clear from covid-19 that countries need to address those threats together.

Covid-19 has affected each and every one of us; no region or country has been spared. According to *The BMJ*, in less than two years covid-19 infected more than 240 million people, with 5 million lives lost. States agreed that the world must be better prepared to predict, prevent, detect, assess and effectively respond to pandemics in a highly co-ordinated fashion. The covid-19 pandemic has been a stark and painful reminder that nobody is safe until everybody is safe. That means that everyone across the world, no matter how poor or how challenging a nation state is, needs access to safe, affordable and effective vaccines, and to medicines and diagnostics for future pandemics.

So far, so good, but there is a claim that a legally binding WHO pandemic treaty will give the WHO the authority during a pandemic to trump sovereignty and control UK policies, including on lockdowns, school closures and vaccines. If true, that would be a valid concern for every country. Will the Minister reassure my constituents who signed the petition that the treaty is voluntary, that it does not overrule the UK's ability to legislate for our own pandemic-related policies, and that no UK sovereignty would be ceded at any time to the WHO?

There are also claims that the WHO has continued to develop two international legal instruments intended to have force under international law, with the aim of

increasing its own global authority in managing health emergencies, including pandemics. It is claimed that the two instruments work in synergy, with the international health regulations amendments laying out new and specific powers and processes desired by the WHO and its sponsors during health emergencies and extending the context in which such powers can be used, and the treaty providing the terms for the administration, financing and governance of the powers and processes underpinning the enlarged international health regulations.

While the Government have so far expressed support for the treaty and said that they are

"actively shaping its design to ensure it improves how the world prevents, prepares for, and responds to future disease outbreaks of pandemic potential",

they have made it clear that

"the key will be to ensure the final text is clearly in the UK national interest".

Negotiations on the draft text continue, including on key international principles such as human rights, sovereignty, transparency and accountability. Will the Minister please confirm and provide assurance to my constituents who signed the petition that no UK Government will sign any legal instrument, treaty or convention that will fundamentally and detrimentally change the relationship between the World Health Organisation and its member states, including the UK?

When a draft treaty is finalised—if ever, as it will need the agreement of nearly 200 countries—it is vital that the why, when, how and what of the treaty and whether it is actually needed are debated, considered and scrutinised by UK elected representatives. Does strengthening global health governance require a treaty? Are there more effective ways to strengthen global health governance after the covid-19 disaster? We must look at those questions. What we must be wary of, however, is conspiracy theories distorting the facts and scaring people. Transparency of debate is therefore needed to squash those conspiracy theories, to provide proper scrutiny, and to put people's minds at rest.

5.19 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I welcome the opportunity to debate this topic. I have been calling for such a debate for some months and thank the 156,000 electors who have allowed us to have it.

The pandemic treaty must be viewed in conjunction with the proposed amendments to the international health regulations. As George Santayana said, those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. I have some severe worries that the lessons of the last pandemic have not been learned by the WHO itself, and that we are in danger of giving it more powers to enable it to overreach itself and repeat those catastrophic mistakes.

I will start by talking about the WHO itself. As my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) pointed out, it was founded in 1948 as a specialised agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health. It consists of 194 member states—basically the whole of the UN membership excluding Lichtenstein and the Holy See. It was based originally on a WHO constitution that is still there today, but that will be fundamentally changed by the two instruments that are in the pipeline following the covid-19 pandemic.

[Andrew Bridgen]

The WHO is domiciled in Geneva and so has special status. Its employees are exempt from tax and they and their families all have diplomatic immunity. It is indeed a supranational body, unelected and unaccountable. I think my constituents would fear that.

How is the WHO set up? Well, it has something called the World Health Assembly, which meets yearly in Geneva. The WHA is the legislative and supreme decision-making body of the WHO. It elects the secretary general and the executive board and votes on the policy of the WHO. The current chairperson of the World Health Assembly of the WHO is a gentleman by the name of Harsh Vardhan. In 2021, the Indian Medical Association—the Indian version of the BMA, and the largest association of doctors in India—issued a statement objecting to Vardhan, who was endorsing Coronil, a product that was being made in India. The IMA questioned the ethics of the Health Minister—Dr Vardhan was the Health Minister of India at that time—in the release of a fabricated and unscientific product on to the people of India. He has since gone on to become chairperson of the WHA, which will preside over this new treaty, which will sit before every Government in the world. Given that he resigned from the Cabinet in India over that controversy, whyever has he been trusted with greater responsibility? It seems that he has failed upwards, like many at the WHO and the WHA.

The original ideals of the WHO were completely laudable. The WHO is to serve the health of the people, governed by its member states, which will implement health policy in the interests of their people. Under article 3 of the international health regulations—before they are amended—state sovereignty and the rule of law will be respected. People's self-determination will be fully respected. All human rights, conventions and other Acts that countries have joined up to will be respected. That is protected under article 54 of the original regulations on human rights.

Who is funding the WHO now? It is funded like many of our regulators in the UK: the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is 86% funded by industry sources, and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, in its members' personal declarations, declared more than £1 billion of interests in big pharma, the thing it was set up to regulate. That undermines public confidence. The WHO is no longer anything like majority-funded by its member states—the ones it is seeking to control. It is 86% funded by external sources.

I am not sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) is correct. The UK is not the second-largest donor, but the third-largest. The second-largest donor after Germany is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and I think Gavi is the fifth, so if we add those together, they are the biggest donors to the WHO. We have to ask: why are they doing this? They are also the biggest investors in pharmaceuticals and the experimental mRNA technology that proved so profitable for those who proposed and produced it during the last pandemic. Indeed, the WHO said that the contributions of member states to WHO funds

“have been capped and today account for only 16% of WHO's total budget”,

with

“an increasing share of funding to WHO coming as voluntary contributions where donors direct funding according to their priorities.”

Well, their priorities might well not be the priorities of my constituents in North West Leicestershire, or the electorate in the UK, but he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The WHO is promoting the influence of private-public partnerships. It promotes that on its websites to the point where it is pay to play. Anyone can buy influence at the WHO; it will just cost them money. When it comes to consulting, the WHO's own internal report—its survey evaluation in its final report on 23 May 2022—said that the various interest groups have more input to WHO policy than the member states. The WHO's own figures say that the member states only participation was 40% of the input, whereas 60% came from non-member states and 276 stakeholders.

It is clear that there is a strong external influence on the policy of the WHO, an entity whose amendments to the International Health Regulations and the pandemic treaty will come to pass by May 2024 if this House does nothing and does not vote. Doing nothing is not an option: it will not go away.

The WHO's intermediate study says that the WHO is an international organisation created as a sub-agency of the United Nations for the objective of obtaining the “highest possible level of health” for all people, but at what cost? What cost democracy? What cost to individual freedoms? It is now 80% funded by non-member states, and it is heavily influenced. During the pandemic, it took extra powers, such as the fact that it could define information. It took on a position—and this will be enacted in law, and binding, in those two new instruments—that the WHO has the ability to say what is disinformation.

When anybody says that the science is settled on any issue, I suggest that this House would smell a rat straight away. The science is never settled: it is always open for modification and for new things to be discovered and theses to be refined. The WHO is saying that it will be the arbiter of what the science is, and that cannot be right. It is a bit like someone saying that the market has changed—well, in my experience it never has. That is a huge grab of power. The two instruments—the pandemic treaty and the amendments to the international health regulations—are progressing in parallel.

I am really worried whether colleagues have actually read the treaty, because clearly when we take out the words “not binding” through an amendment, it becomes binding. These are binding treaties: if we do nothing, they are binding—legally binding across all the nations. They bring in an idea called “One Health”, which extends the ability of the director-general of the WHO to call a public health emergency of international concern—which, incidentally, is abbreviated to FAKE. It says that he can bring in these powers on the suspicion or risk of an international incident. It does not even have to be a pathogen affecting humans; it can affect animals. It could be because of the environment or an increase in the levels of carbon dioxide.

I suggest that right hon. and hon. Members read the treaty. It is a massive extension of powers. At the drop of a hat, one man—Mr Tedros—can call for massive

powers for the WHO. Not only will he call for them; when he takes the powers, he will decide when the pandemic or emergency is over and when he will give the powers back to this House, where elected representatives are supposed to be representing the interests of our constituents. All that will be suspended.

While we are talking about Mr Tedros, I remind the House that this gentleman will be deciding the fate of the world, because it will be in his gift to declare emergencies. Look at the conduct of the WHO during the recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where 83 individuals who were working for the WHO sexually abused local women, including the sexual assault of a 13-year-old girl. It was all covered up. There was a leaked document from the WHO, which would have been in front of Mr Tedros's committee. A confidential UN report submitted to the WHO last month concluded that the managers' handling of a case did not violate WHO sexual exploitation policies because the woman concerned was not a beneficiary of WHO aid, as she did not receive any humanitarian support. That is completely unacceptable, if those are the rules of an organisation that will be deciding whether my constituents are locked down for six months or three months, and whether they can go and see their grannies. I do not think it is acceptable.

The proposed new treaties would compress the mandatory reporting time for Governments to report a possible risk to public health to the WHO to 72 hours, and Mr Tedros will make a decision. That is far too little time for any meaningful research to be done on what the real risk is, and it would potentially lead to lots of false alarms and unnecessary disruption. The two proposed instruments seek to take huge powers away from this Parliament and every other Parliament around the world, and they need to be considered very carefully. Sticking our heads in the sand will not do it, and it will not do for my constituents. If we have learned anything from the vote that we had in 2016, it is that people in this country do not want to be ruled by unelected, unaccountable bureaucrats, and there is no one more unaccountable and unelected than people in the WHO. They do not pay tax, and they and their families have immunity from prosecution because they have diplomatic immunity. They are also under the huge financial interests of whoever wishes to fund them.

Many experts are now saying that the two proposed instruments would fundamentally reset the relationship between citizens and sovereign states—not just in this country, but around the whole world. The WHO is an unelected, unaccountable and top-down supranational body, and the treaties would empower its director-general to impose sweeping, legally binding directions on member states. The WHO would have the power to force companies in this country or any other country to manufacture certain medical treatments and to export them to other countries. It would have the power to shut down any business in this country, regardless of what local people think or even what this Parliament thinks.

The proposed treaties would take away all the protections that being in a democracy offers, and they would take away article 3 of the original WHO constitution, which is about respect for human rights and dignity. That would be replaced by a bland statement saying that there will be equity, which means that everyone would be treated equally. It also means that there would be

only one solution to any international problem around the world, which would lead to an all-or-nothing situation whereby if the WHO got it right—if I had time, I would go into everything it got wrong in the last pandemic—maybe we would be okay. But if the WHO got it wrong, the whole of humanity would get it wrong. There would be no competition. If there was only one car manufacturer and only one solution, I am not sure it would be the best car that we could ever have. Competition between nations for solutions is a good thing.

I have grave concerns about the two proposed instruments, and about who is running and controlling the WHO. It would be foolish not to see that pharmaceutical giants have huge influence over the direction of the WHO, with their lobbying power. Like many multinational corporations, their size and scale supersedes national Governments, with over 80% of the WHO budget now specified funding, and they have the ability to direct policy. I think it is fair to say that we are drifting away from the WHO's original and noble ethos of promoting a democratic, holistic approach and co-operation on public health.

The WHO let us down over covid in its response. In January 2020, as has been pointed out, it was still telling us that there was no person-to-person transmission of the virus. That was wrong. It then prescribed lockdowns and mass vaccination during the pandemic, which drove mutations. The pandemic response of the WHO and national Governments should be a cautionary tale about the impact on citizens of handing power to the state. It should certainly not be a template for going further and faster in signing away rights and liberties.

The pandemic response brutally illustrated that the profit-optimised version of the greater good pursued by the WHO often clashes with children's health. Before I spoke out on 13 December on the risks of the experimental mRNA vaccines, the MHRA was looking to authorise the vaccination of children down to the age of six months in this country. I am very grateful that the Government listened and that we did not do that. Indeed, it was pushed back to people over 50 and, after my speech on 17 March, I am delighted that the Government put it back to only those over 75. In a few months, that is a huge difference from trying to vaccinate everybody. If we were all under one rule, we would be doing exactly the opposite of what this country has individually decided to do.

While we are on the subject of opaque, undemocratic organisations, it is interesting to see what the EU is doing. The EU thinks that we need to strengthen all this. Not only will the WHO be allowed to have a department of misinformation, which will be the arbiter of what the truth is during an emergency, but the EU will adopt exactly the same policy and have its own such department, so that in a pandemic there will be only one version of the truth. That is not very good for science, is it?

The One Health approach is a whole-society approach. The WHO will have the ability to mobilise every aspect of our society. Once it calls those emergencies, it will be able to keep them going. It will have control over absolutely every aspect of our citizens' lives. This is absolutely massive. There is no more important treaty. Of course, were we to give away such powers—I would never vote to do so—we should have a referendum, because sovereignty belongs to the people. It is not ours to give away; we know that from the referendum in 2016. I hope that the House listens very carefully and reads these documents.

5.37 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for moving the motion. I thank the 156,000 people who signed the petition, including 295 of my Tatton constituents, who helped to secure today's important debate.

The vast majority of the nation has been busily moving on from the pandemic and the lockdowns, and rightly so, but much analysis of covid and the lockdowns is still ongoing, with the UK covid inquiry beginning to hear evidence in June for its first investigation. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pandemic response and recovery, I welcome that inquiry, and all other frank, open discussions and analysis of the impact and effects of lockdown, and how policies were originated and formulated.

Our APPG has heard from renowned experts such as Professor Carl Heneghan, Lucy Easthope, Mark Woolhouse, Robert Dingwall, Dr Allyson Pollock, Lord Jonathan Sumption, Kate Nicholls OBE and many more, who have all advocated for evidence-based, proportional measures to prevent avoidable suffering and loss. However, while all that analysis is ongoing, the World Health Organisation is preparing an international treaty on pandemic prevention and preparedness. The treaty seeks to enhance international co-operation, which sounds good in theory, but critics say that in practice it could transfer power away from sovereign and democratically elected nations, and the rights of the individual into the hands of the WHO, an unelected and largely privately funded bureaucracy. That is the nub of it. Who has the oversight? Who is creating the powers? Who has a say in it? That is why people have written to their Members of Parliament and asked for a debate here today. They ask, "Where are those powers going? Who is to remain sovereign? Who will have oversight?" Today, we are here to allay those concerns, to get those issues out in the open, and to head off any issues and ensure that we are not signing away our sovereignty.

Here, for the Minister to address, are just a couple of the issues that my constituents have flagged up. It is those word changes—it is not that countries would have to "consider", but that they will now "follow"; it is not that these things are non-binding, but that they are binding. My constituents are not some kind of conspiracy theorists. They come to me saying, "You are my Member of Parliament. I want to hear you debate things on the Floor of the House. I want you to be accountable and, if you are not, we will vote you out at the next election. We want to know that we are in control of what is going on." That is why we are here today. They are concerned about those word changes and what we are doing.

Andrew Bridgen: My right hon. Friend is making a great and informed speech. Are she and the Chamber aware that WHO has extended the public health emergency of international concern every six months since January 2020? As far as WHO is concerned, we are still in an emergency? Once the treaties are in place, it would decide when an emergency is over and it would return those powers to us.

Esther McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for saying those words on the Floor of the House, so that they can be documented in *Hansard*.

My constituents have other concerns. They remind me—not that I need to be reminded—that it was WHO that went against its own 2019 evidence-based influenza pandemic guidelines. It never advocated lockdowns as a method of controlling respiratory illnesses but, following China's early lead, it began to champion lockdowns. Look at the U-turns on face coverings: in March 2020, it did not recommend them for healthy people, but the sudden change in the guidance followed despite the apparent lack of any new, high-quality research. In July 2020, BBC's "Newsnight" suggested that the decision was the direct result of political lobbying.

Before covid-19, WHO had repeatedly overestimated deaths from new infections, diseases and outbreaks. In 2009, for example, it predicted a swine flu death toll of 7.5 million and warned that nearly a third of the entire world population would become infected. That led to knee-jerk over-investment in vaccine contracts, which clawed precious money away from fighting other diseases. In the end, it was concluded that total global mortality was roughly on a par with annual deaths caused by seasonal influenza, nowhere near the original prediction.

Those are the issues that my constituents raise with me—issues of who we are handing control to. As they say, WHO has not covered itself in glory in providing consistent, clear and scientifically sound advice for managing many international disease outbreaks. As we heard from many Members today, the World Health Organisation was set up in the aftermath of the second world war with the aim of providing a high standard of healthcare for all. It approached health in the round, promoting community-based services to address physical, mental and social wellbeing—all admirable reasons for why it was set up.

In recent decades, however, WHO's focus appears to have narrowed, as private foundations and pharmaceutical companies become an increasingly significant and influential part of WHO's funding base. Its approach has become more focused on vaccine-based interventions and, most recently, on blunt instruments such as lockdowns, of which we are still analysing the consequences. It is safe to say there was a negative impact on the young.

As Ofsted's damning 2021 report pointed out, children have fallen well behind in their education and suffered significantly, in particular in their mental health, as a result of lockdowns. Here in the UK, it is estimated that school closures will lead to significantly lower life expectancy and to £40,000 being lost from the lifetime earnings of each individual. Children should never have had to shoulder such an enormous burden, and one that will likely hamper them for the rest of their lives. The lockdowns—those stay-at-home mandates—damaged the economy, but more importantly they drove and will drive many people into poverty, to such an extent that Professor Thomas of the University of Bristol thinks that 2.5 million life years have been lost because of a loss of GDP and those lockdowns. The poverty that we have inflicted on people with lockdowns is incredible.

This petition, calling for a referendum on the treaty, makes it clear that there is growing concern about the expansion of the WHO's powers and the encroachment on national sovereignty. The UK Government have declared unilaterally that the UK supports a new international legally binding instrument as part of a co-operative and comprehensive approach to pandemic

prevention, preparedness and response. Will the Minister explain how that can be the case when Parliament has not yet been allowed to scrutinise those plans?

Although we must not overhype the nature of the threat—I get that—this proposed treaty could, or should, give us all pause for thought. It may not yet be clear how the WHO would legally enforce any of these emergency powers and policies, but there is plenty of potential for its unelected bureaucrats to chip away at our democratic standards. It is therefore vital that we demand robust debate, and an open review of all these plans in Parliament and in public—something that was sorely lacking during covid times.

Our parliamentary system was not really designed to support referendums, so I would be loth to inflict another referendum on the public. However, I agree on the need for parliamentary scrutiny. We need debate and votes in both Houses to ensure that this country lives up to its democratic obligations to its citizens, and to ensure we continue to make our own decisions about how we manage public health threats in this country.

5.47 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), who does such important work with her APPG. At a recent meeting, we were privileged to be able to listen to Toby Green and Thomas Fazi, the joint authors of “The Covid Consensus”. I know that some of the material she used in her remarks comes from the fantastic work that those two individuals have put forward.

I will start with a question: why are our Government supporting changes to the treaty based on article 19? Article 19 is the compulsion—mandatory—whereas article 21 gives the opportunity to opt in and out. Why would we wish to impose a commitment that we cannot get out of under article 19? When my right hon. Friend the Minister responds, I ask her to embrace the idea, which has already been discussed in the intergovernmental negotiating body—although article 19 is the most comprehensive provision of the WHO constitution under which the instrument could be adopted—that the body is open to confirming whether article 21 could also be an appropriate way of making progress on the treaty.

Article 21 relates to the World Health Assembly’s powers to adopt regulations on a range of technical, health-related matters. Regulations under article 21 would come into force for all member states, except where members reject or make reservations within a specified notice period. In other words, it would be relatively more relaxed than article 19, which would effectively mean this was a mandatory treaty with no option but to comply.

If we think that the only way to deal with pandemics is for all countries across the globe to unite, let us remind ourselves that, if we had our time again, many of us would have said that the Swedes got it right. In a sense, they were the outliers at the time. Under some international mandatory ruling, they would not have been allowed to experiment in the way that they did—to follow their instincts for liberty, freedom and science-based evidence before restricting people from going about their normal business. Why would we want to have a treaty that gave no flexibility to individual countries to

decide what was best in their particular circumstances in any given situation? I hope that we can get an answer from the Government on that and about why they are going hell for leather to try to adopt a mandatory treaty.

The extent of concern about this issue has taken many people by surprise. It is symptomatic of people’s loss of trust in Governments and, in particular, in some of the health Departments of Governments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton mentioned in passing that the WHO itself did a complete volte-face. They were supposedly the experts, and they brought forward a document relating to preparedness for a pandemic in November 2019. That document made no reference whatever to many of the measures that were subsequently adopted by the WHO and by Governments across the world. My right hon. Friend referred to the fact that there was no mention even of the word “lockdown”—let alone of the idea that confining people to barracks and preventing them from going about their daily lives would be good for health outcomes. We now know that that has been pretty bad news for people, particularly the younger generation, for whom covid-19 was less of a direct threat to health. As a result of the lockdown measures, younger people have suffered disproportionately and will continue to suffer as they live the rest of their lives. Why should we want to trust the WHO absolutely?

Andrew Bridgen: My hon. Friend is a stalwart for those who have been vaccine harmed and vaccine bereaved, and he is making a great contribution. Does he agree that the WHO has let us all down very badly with its unilateral decision not to investigate where the virus originated? If we could find the labs in which it was developed, and if we could find those who authorised it and funded it and bring them criminally to account, that would surely be the best way of dissuading anyone from again carrying out this sort of action, which has caused so much harm around the world.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which is a question that I was going to pose and seek to answer. One of the issues is that China has a lot to cover up. If it is not covering it up, why is it not allowing people to investigate exactly what happened at Wuhan? Why is it not co-operating with the World Health Organisation? The answer is that, in a sense, the World Health Organisation is now subservient to China.

Those of us in this House who have long expressed concerns about undue Chinese influence over our lives, and over the freedom of western civilisation, need to take stock and ask ourselves who is in charge of this World Health Organisation. Some people have referred to him by what I think is one of his Christian names, Tedros Adhanom; I will refer to him by his surname, which is Ghebreyesus. He is a former Ethiopian Minister of Health. He was previously a senior figure in the Tigray People’s Liberation Front. Some people here today may remember that many senior members of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front were also members of the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray. Mr Ghebreyesus won support from Beijing in order to become the director general of the WHO, and China has quite a large control, through him, of the WHO. Margaret Chan, a former WHO director general, said in 2012 that the WHO budget is driven by donor interests. Let us be quite open about it: the Bill Gates Foundation, big

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

pharma and big tech are supplying a lot of the resource to the WHO. They are not covering that up; they are proud of it—indeed, they make a big thing of the fact that more than half of the WHO’s expenditure is now on vaccine programmes rather than other ways of alleviating malnutrition and health problems across the globe.

Has this man—the current director general—got connections with the Bill Gates Foundation and the big funders of the WHO? Yes, he has. He was formerly a member of two of the Gates boards, Gavi and the Global Fund, so he is himself very much in with Gates—with the donors. How can he be trusted to be independent when he owes his continuing position to those donors and also to the support of the Chinese republic?

We may say, “Well, so what? Let the WHO carry on as it has been for many years. It could be an advisory body. Nobody has to listen to it, and we can take it or leave it.” But unfortunately, the developing influence of the WHO is that it now wishes to impose its standards on the whole world. That is why people have become alerted and signed this petition in very large numbers. They do not wish this country to give up its control over its ability to manage its own affairs when faced with an epidemic or a pandemic. They certainly do not want some body like the WHO, which is wedded to the Chinese version of authoritarian capitalism—authoritarian capitalists—telling people what they can and cannot do: saying that people cannot go about their normal business, live their lives as individuals or, as an old person, meet their relatives, and all the rest.

I am pleased to say that in so far as we were able to, I voted against all those restrictions on freedom. I continue to believe that we made big mistakes in how we addressed the pandemic through lockdowns that were not scientifically based and in respect of which there were no proper cost-benefit analyses. But leave that on one side. The WHO is controlled by people who we would not wish to be in control of our lives. That is why both the United States and our Government are trying to break out of some of the Chinese Government’s controlling influences. But what are we doing about this situation? Why in these circumstances would a rational Government—I still believe that the Government I support are rational—engage in giving an enormous amount of power over our lives to the Chinese and Chinese-influenced and dominated organisations? That seems to be sheer lunacy to me. I hope that in responding to this debate my right hon. Friend will be able to agree on that point. One does not have to do anything other than point out the connections between the director general of the Gates Foundation, the Chinese Government and so on to get people to say, “Gosh, I’m a bit concerned about that.” In our daily lives, we judge companies and organisations on the basis of the people running them. If one looks at the people running the WHO, we should quite rightly ask some serious questions about their behaviour.

A lot more could be said about this treaty, but I am going to finish my remarks by asking the Government to change their approach and listen to the people. This petition was signed by a large number of people. It is not the sort of petition that is presented to someone with a, “Will you sign that?” because in order to sign this petition, people need to apply their mind and get a pretty good understanding of the subject matter. In that

respect, although the numbers are well above the minimum threshold to get a debate in this House, the quality of the petition and the arguments within it mean that it is one of the most serious petitions that we have had to debate.

Andrew Bridgen: Without wishing to be accused of being a conspiracy theorist, can I just spin a scenario to my hon. Friend? Imagine a nightmare situation in which the House ignored the two new instruments from the WHO, and then some time in the next 12 months before they are ratified in May 2024 there happens to be another release from a lab—another pandemic—and then both Houses of Parliament were given no time to debate the two instruments before ratification. Should we not avoid that nightmare situation by having that debate now?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree with my hon. Friend, as I almost always do. Prevention is better than cure. Why would we want to give up control over all these issues by signing up to this treaty?

I have here a quote from Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*. He said:

“The allegation that WHO shared responsibility for the pandemic by adopting a policy of appeasement towards China has proven impossible to refute.”

There we have it. The editor-in-chief of no less than *The Lancet* says that we need to be extremely suspicious of what is going on and what may happen. That is a good credential for the Government to adopt in saying, “We are not going to adopt this WHO treaty under article 19; we are going to examine it more carefully, be much more circumspect, and retain the ability of our own country and our own people to decide these important issues for ourselves.”

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): As all the Back Benchers who wanted to speak have done so, we move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople. I call Anne McLaughlin for the SNP.

6.3 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): There is a need for reflection and scrutiny of the covid-19 pandemic, and we need to understand the plans for any future pandemics, but we need an international approach, and the SNP fully supports this WHO agreement.

The SNP has supported global co-operation and co-ordination throughout the coronavirus pandemic. It is only when the world is safe from covid-19 that any of us are truly safe. Only by working together and embracing global co-operation, not competition, can we tackle global crises such as climate change and pandemics. The covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the importance of strong, global public health infrastructure and how quickly healthcare provision can break down if the basics of medicines, tracking, treatment and other resources are not available. As others have said, international collaboration is the best way to avert and handle future pandemics. The world is not safe until all populations are safeguarded, wherever they are in the world.

I understand the principle behind the petition. I appreciate that people want to be able to hold their Government to account, and we must be able to scrutinise Governments. But there appears to be some misunderstanding around the WHO’s work and how it interacts

with Governments. I have done a bit of reading and have listened to the reasons given by those who oppose this potential treaty, and they often have concerns that the WHO would be running health policy for all countries who sign up to it. But those working on drafting the treaty have already included sovereignty as one of its guiding principles and rights. The latest draft of the treaty from 1 February 2023 starts by:

“Reaffirming the principle of sovereignty of States Parties in addressing public health matters, notably pandemic prevention, preparedness, response and health systems recovery”.

There are no proposals to change that, and the healthcare policy, even in a pandemic, would remain entirely a matter for sovereign nations to decide. The World Health Organisation would be able to make recommendations once a global emergency is declared, but they would just be recommendations. Contrary to what others have said, they would be non-binding. The treaty would not require Governments to act on WHO instructions, nor would it require anyone to sacrifice sovereignty. Rather, it would enable Governments to plan together, detect pathogens more quickly, share data more broadly and respond more effectively to the next pandemic.

Those concerned about the impact of the WHO's involvement are perhaps unaware, or have forgotten, that the UK already implements the WHO's international health regulations, or IHR. Those regulations provide a framework that defines countries' rights and obligations in handling public health events and emergencies that have the potential to cross borders. The regulations have been in place in some form since 1969, and the latest regulations have been in operation since 2007, but this has not meant a loss of individual nations' control over health policy.

On the international stage, the SNP will always support measures to improve global public health. Those include reversing the damaging aid cuts by the UK Government—specifically, in this context, those inflicted on health and wellbeing projects.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No, I will not.

Official development assistance has been cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income, creating a £4.6 billion funding black hole compared with 2019 levels, and health and wellbeing programme funding has been absolutely slashed. As part of their wider international development pattern, the UK Government are cutting funding for conflict resolution projects at a time of renewed war, cutting health and medical funding in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and cutting food programmes during a time of global food insecurity. All of this is morally reprehensible.

It is positive, of course, that the UK Government are supporting the treaty, but it is important to remember that despite the pressing need for a global, collective response to health crises, the UK Government are repeatedly falling short of the mark and reneging on their pledges. It is morally and pragmatically indefensible that the UK Government should continue to actively jeopardise the lives and wellbeing of the world's poorest and most vulnerable. With the Government maintaining the ODA budget at below 0.7% of GNI, there is no other way to describe what they are doing.

Along with supporting the treaty, the SNP is calling on the UK Government to reinstate the aid budget to 0.7% of GNI as an urgent priority, ensure that aid spending on health programmes and projects around the world is increased to pre-covid-19 pandemic and pre-UK aid cut levels, and ringfence the overseas aid budget for spending abroad, to ensure that the aid budget is not being spent here in the UK on refugee and asylum support. The Government must also establish a much-improved, stand-alone Home Office model that better supports refugees and asylum seekers.

The SNP believes that referenda are essential to establish public consent on issues concerning constitutional make-up and sovereignty, not on every issue that someone might disagree with. The treaty would have absolutely no effect whatever on the UK's constitutional function and sovereignty, and we are therefore of the firm belief that it does not warrant a referendum.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No.

I was certainly sympathetic when the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) lamented the terrible situation whereby the UK might be unable to make its own decisions if it is outvoted by other countries. Imagine! However, as the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said, the UK is a leading member of the WHO and a primary architect of the treaty, so that is not what is happening here. If it were, however, what level of hypocrisy would it take to think that this one issue deserves a referendum, but the unresolved issue of Scotland's independence does not?

The final outcome for consideration on this prospective treaty is expected to be presented to the 77th World Health Assembly in May 2024. Scotland stands ready to play our part in international efforts to collaborate and co-operate—not compete—on pandemic preparedness, awareness responses and collective prevention, so we do not support the petition.

6.10 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions. I am glad that the debate has been conducted in a mostly measured and thoughtful way.

The covid pandemic has been one of the most surreal and seismic global events of our lifetimes, with 212,000 people having died as a result of it in the United Kingdom and our economy having been directly hit to the tune of £250 billion of gross value added. The social impacts on everything from our children's lost learning to NHS waiting lists will be felt for years to come. The extent of the damage that the pandemic caused was not inevitable. The UK was badly unprepared. NHS waiting lists were at record levels even before the pandemic hit. We had staff shortages of 100,000 in our health service and 112,000 vacancies in social care.

In 2016, the outcome of Exercise Cygnus informed the Government that the NHS would not be able to cope with a flu pandemic; yet they still reduced the stock of PPE and the number of beds. Too many people have paid for that decision with their lives, particularly

[Preet Kaur Gill]

in care homes across our country as untested patients were ferried from hospitals to homes. Then of course there are the billions of public money wasted on unusable PPE, the chaotic shuffling in and out of lockdowns from a Government that could not get a grip, and at the end of it, the UK's abject position as the worst hit economy in the G7.

After 12 years of Tory complacency, the next Labour Government will never leave our country with such a soft underbelly. The next Labour Government will deliver a new 10-year plan for the NHS, including one of the biggest expansions of the NHS workforce in history, doubling the number of medical school places to 15,000 a year, training more GPs, nurses and health visitors each year, and harnessing life sciences and technology to reduce preventable illness.

While it might feel like the pandemic is over now, the threat is not. That is what today's debate is about. Far from a once-in-100-years event, many natural biological threats have emerged in recent years, including severe acute respiratory syndrome, avian flu, middle east respiratory syndrome, Ebola and monkeypox. Climate change and globalisation mean that natural biological threats are becoming more common, and it is not only biological threats that we must prepare for. Advances in gene editing mean that virologists can more easily modify viruses to be deadlier and spread more quickly, increasing the security risk posed by bioweapons and bioterrorism. Will the Minister comment on our concern that the biological weapons convention currently remains very weak, with little funding and only four staff, compared with the 500 staff for the chemical weapons convention?

Pandemic preparedness must therefore be taken seriously as a matter of national security. Future threats could be far deadlier than covid-19. During the first wave of coronavirus, 1% of infected individuals died, compared with 80% during the west African Ebola epidemic. The lesson of the pandemic was that no one is safe until everyone is safe, and that global health is local health, so global co-operation on pandemic preparedness and biological threats clearly needs to be strengthened. That is why the Opposition absolutely support the principle of a legally binding WHO treaty that sets the standard for all countries to contribute to global health security. Our country was set back not just once but three times by new, dangerous covid variants that originated overseas. We are stronger together than trying to firefight such crises alone.

The WHO is the primary UN agency for international public health. In its history of over 70 years, it has contributed to the eradication of smallpox, helped to immunise millions of children against preventable diseases such as tuberculosis and measles, and is supporting the near eradication of wild polio. Currently the WHO is responding to 55 graded emergencies around the world. Last year, it supported member states in response to 75 different health emergencies. More than 339 million people are now in need of direct humanitarian assistance, and in those countries affected by fragility and conflict we are seeing 80% of the world's major epidemics.

The principles laid out in the zero draft text on pandemic preparedness are a strong foundation from which to begin to respond to some of those crises. The text on strengthening global health systems and universal

health coverage, on international transparency and on the sharing of technology, diagnostics, vaccines and knowhow echoes what Opposition Members said consistently during the pandemic. It is through multilateral efforts, strengthened through international law, that we can ensure that the response to the next pandemic is faster and more effective, and does not leave other countries behind.

I know that the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) has been calling for this debate for some time and that he has reservations. It is important that we have this debate and show that there is no shadowy conspiracy. I am afraid that the reality is much more mundane than that. I note his claims that a treaty will

"hand over...powers to an unelected...supranational body",

even despite the fact that it would still have to be ratified by the United Kingdom and there is over a year of negotiations to go. I point out to him that the very first statement in the zero draft text reaffirms

"the principle of sovereignty of States Parties".

Moreover, it states that the implementation of the regulations

"shall be with full respect for the dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms of persons".

Of course, the draft text makes no reference to vaccine mandates, lockdowns or any such draconian policies. If the hon. Gentleman reads it, he will see that the draft treaty is primarily about transparency, fostering international co-operation and strengthening global health systems, in recognition of the catastrophic impact of the pandemic on developing countries. It is on the face of the text.

Sir Christopher Chope: Has the hon. Lady taken the point that there is a difference between article 21 and article 19? Why is she supporting article 19 as the means of introducing this measure, rather than the more flexible article 21?

Preet Kaur Gill: I have set out the reasons why I support this, and I will continue to make that case so that the hon. Gentleman understands why Opposition Members support the treaty as it stands. There will, of course, be negotiations and, as I keep saying, we will have to ratify it in the United Kingdom. There is another year to go, so it is possible to contribute to and feed into the process. The hon. Gentleman should direct his comments to the Minister.

As I have said, the negotiations operate on the principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. That is a really important principle to hold on to. In over a year's time, there will be a two-thirds vote of WHO members and then, ultimately, it will be for us to ratify and enact those policies as we interpret them. It is really important that we recognise that.

Far from there being a conspiracy, this process is built on the very basis of international co-operation, which is essential for tackling transnational threats. As a country, we have a proud history of supporting the international system, using our influence and expertise to set common standards and bring parties together to achieve more than they can achieve alone. If we can use the WHO to support basic universal healthcare around the world, infectious diseases are less likely to spread and fuel global pandemics. Of course, that is in our national interest, too.

As I have said, pandemic preparedness is a matter of national security. Last year, in a debate on global vaccine access, I warned that striving for vaccine equity is not only a moral imperative but a matter of national interest. Yet those lessons have not yet been translated into action. Today, just 27% of people in low-income countries have received a first dose of a covid vaccine, demonstrating the terrible divide in coverage between richer countries and the global south. This Government have paid homage to the need to address that in words and announcements, but in truth their record has been dire. It includes a damaging departmental merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the height of the global crisis; repeated aid cuts to the very programmes designed to keep us and others safe; and consistently not keeping promises made to poorer countries.

Nobody expected the UK to retreat from the world stage at a time like that, or for it to vandalise its own relationships, expertise and capacity. The message it sent out to our partners and allies has been received loud and clear: they know who they can trust to show up in an international crisis and who they cannot. The irony is that those decisions harmed us as much as anyone. Vital research programmes to track new covid variants were slashed by 70%, pulling the plug on many programmes mid-project and causing years of research to go to waste. Programmes to treat tropical diseases were cut by a shocking 95%, leaving millions of people vulnerable and risking the wastage of over 270 million doses of life-saving drugs. The UK's contribution to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was cut by 95% for at least five years—last summer, polio resurfaced in the UK for the first time in 40 years.

Now, as our Government divert the development budget to prop up their failing asylum system, eight of South Sudan's 10 state-run hospitals have lost their funding this month, putting them on the brink of collapse. Can the Minister explain what assessment she has made of the impact of that decision? Can she say when the refreshed global health framework will be published, and how it will draw lessons from the last three years?

The divide exposed by the pandemic was stark. At a time when millions in the global south were in greatest need, the international system failed them. The Government's charity model of aid did not share vaccines equitably or effectively, leaving millions unprotected and the poorest countries paying the highest price. The UK's own promises illustrate that point. At the G7 in 2021, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), promised to donate 100 million surplus vaccine doses within a year. A year later, barely a third were delivered, the aid budget was raided to do it, and the UK effectively profiteered at poor countries' expense.

Earlier this month, provisional spending figures for 2022 were revealed, and a further £225 million was charged against the aid budget for vaccines we had spare—effectively making a £330 million cut to the budget. Can the Minister provide a breakdown of the number of doses that were shared directly with developing countries, and through COVAX, by make and pricing, last year? How many doses were shared in total? What steps did she take to minimise the cost to the aid budget, bearing in mind that those surplus doses would have been incinerated if they were not used? How many vaccines were priced at the maximum possible of \$6.66?

There is a different way—a way that does not merely give people crumbs from our table. Labour's new model for development will be based not on charity, but on solidarity and long-term development planning. Our comprehensive plan to ramp up global vaccine manufacturing—set out in 2021—is the blueprint for the change we need to see. The pandemic revealed a fundamental problem: namely, that the world has more capability to invent and develop vaccines than it has to manufacture and distribute them on a global scale. While donating our surplus vaccine doses to poor countries was the right thing to do, in practice it has been slow, inefficient, and, in this Government's case, used as a cover to make further stealth cuts to our aid budget at poor countries' expense.

Developing countries should not have to wait for handouts at the back of the queue. The next Labour Government will strengthen global health systems, using the NHS as a model. We will help to establish an international mechanism to rapidly produce and distribute vaccines, to share technology, knowledge and skills, and to build the infrastructure the world needs to deliver it. We need a global effort to develop viable, orally active vaccines in solid dose form, building on the innovative work carried out by a number of pharmaceutical companies. That historic breakthrough would include the prospect of a vaccine delivery system that does not rely on needles and could lead to less need for trained vaccinators, increasing take up and negating cold chain storage, meaning fewer doses would expire before they could be used.

Finally, we need a binding, enforceable investment and trade agreement among all participating countries to govern the co-ordination of supplies and the financing of production, to prevent hoarding of materials and equipment, and to centrally manage the production and distribution process for maximum efficiency and output in the wake of a pandemic being declared. I am pleased to see that this draft treaty offers a strong starting point. Technology transfer and the open sharing of vaccines, science, technology and knowledge through the trade-related intellectual property rights waiver would help ensure everyone can access vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, and that no one is left behind.

I would be grateful if the Minister could set out the Government's approach to negotiations, particularly on the matters of intellectual property waivers, increased local production capacity and conditions on public funding for research. Future international initiatives need to be followed in letter and in spirit. Does the Minister recognise the importance of an accountability framework to ensure the accord's success, and will she and her officials be pushing for that in talks? Separately, does she acknowledge the continued importance of action to address the debt crisis in low-income countries, which is clearly diverting resources away from public services and health systems? What does she see as the UK's role in helping to unlock relief for countries in debt distress and bring creditors to the table?

Negotiating an effective international treaty on pandemic preparedness is an historic task, but, if we can achieve it, it will save hundreds of thousands of lives in the years to come, provide the foundation of a sustained global economic recovery and give us and our partners the freedom and confidence to plan for the future. Labour has a comprehensive plan to strengthen Britain's health security, to end the 13 years of sticking-plaster politics under this Government and to return Britain to the international stage as a trusted development partner.

6.25 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for leading this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and, importantly, on behalf of the petitioners. I am also grateful for the contributions of all hon. Members, and I will try to respond as best I can. I will ask officials to write to Members to answer the questions to which I am unable to provide answers. In particular, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) has entirely unsurprisingly taken the opportunity to ask a series of questions on areas that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would be highly capable of responding on. However, he is unable to be here due to other ministerial duties. I will ensure that responses are provided for those questions.

As covid-19 clearly demonstrated, it is in all our interests to invest in global health. The world was ill-prepared for the pandemic, which killed millions, wiped billions off the global economy and undid years of progress on our development goals. The three years since covid struck have been a wake-up call for the whole world. They have highlighted the importance of strong, resilient and inclusive health systems and have made clear that we need a co-ordinated approach across our work on human health, animal health and the environment. Covid also shone a spotlight on the need for agreed international protocols, so that information is shared in a timely fashion. It underlined how important it is that vaccines, treatments and tests are available to all who need them.

In short, we need collective international action, co-operation and mutual accountability to protect future generations from the catastrophic impacts of pandemics. Finding the best ways to manage communities of all economic strengths and resilient shapes and sizes is, of course, one critical part of that. That is why the UK is working with G7 partners and others to catalyse international efforts to try to help countries of all shapes and sizes to be better prepared.

As part of this, the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), joined other world leaders in 2021 in calling for a new international instrument to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. All 194 WHO member states agreed by consensus to draft and negotiate a new pandemic instrument. There was a clear view that this could transform global health security and deliver the changes necessary to withstand health threats, for example, by making sure that the world has fit-for-purpose agreements in place for data-sharing and surveillance, to be able to help slow or contain the spread of disease and to support a speedy and effective response.

In November 2021, together with the other members of the World Health Organisation, the UK agreed to establish an intergovernmental body to draft and negotiate the new pandemic instrument, with a target date of May 2024.

To answer my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), that is being negotiated with a view to adoption under article 19 of the WHO constitution,

but without prejudice to considering adoption under article 21 as negotiations progress, if that was to be the preferred decision of all member states in the consensus decision that they hope to reach.

The article 19 route would not negate the ability of each member state to accept it through their own national constitutional processes, which is a really important part of the question that I will refer to further. Whether agreed under article 19 or 21, both will be legally binding as a matter of international law.

As part of our wider efforts to improve global health security through strengthening international law, the UK is participating in parallel negotiations to update the international health regulations: the technical public health framework, which a number of colleagues referred to, that requires countries to report and respond to potential cross-border health threats.

Over the next year, UK officials will shape and negotiate a text with other WHO members to ensure that it delivers on our priorities. Those will include: working towards faster and more equitable access to affordable vaccines, treatments and tests; strengthening collaboration on scientific research and development, including clinical trials and data sharing; improving collaboration and co-ordination across the human, animal and environment health sectors to try to control threats from zoonotic diseases among those other threats that we know are out there; and building strong health systems to support populations to access the health services they need during and after a pandemic.

We are already demonstrating global leadership in those priority areas. Through our multilateral and bilateral investments, we are helping low and middle-income countries to develop resilient systems and services. For example, we trained more than 600 health workers in Côte d'Ivoire to strengthen surveillance, reached over 53,000 people in Cameroon through outreach campaigns led by civil society partners and substantially increased response times to reported public health events in Mali.

Through our "One Health" approach, we are working to monitor and control the spread of diseases between humans, animals and the environment. We supported Cameroon to carry out a simulation exercise that tested and refined plans to deal with disease outbreaks of zoonotic origin, including monkeypox. Meanwhile, our investments in research and development are increasing equitable access to vaccines, drugs and diagnostics. With UK support, the Medicines for Malaria Venture has developed and rolled out more than 13 new anti-malarials. To date, those medicines have saved an estimated 2.7 million lives.

In all of this, we are working in strong partnership with academic institutions, the private sector and other organisations. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations—CEPI, as it is known—is a great example of that partnership work, helping to ensure that medical innovations are affordable and accessible to those in need. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has committed £230 million to CEPI to support the development of vaccines for covid-19, which includes the covid-19 vaccine candidate developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca, with support from the Department of Health and Social Care's UK vaccine network. As we have seen, the Oxford-AstraZeneca covid-19 vaccine has saved lives worldwide.

The UK has been a global leader, working with CEPI, Gavi and the WHO to ensure that our scientific leaders can help tackle health crises. As Secretary of State for International Development back in early 2020, I was proud to lead the fundraising for Gavi and COVAX to ensure that vaccines—once, we hoped, they were found—could be delivered as quickly as possible through the incredible networks that organisations such as Gavi have to reach across the globe. When covid hit, it was clear, however, that stronger collective international action, co-operation and mutual accountability will be needed if we are to tackle more effectively the global health threats of the future. Sadly, as colleagues as have said, we know that we need to be prepared for them.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my right hon. Friend believe that China is complying with the requirements to be open and transparent, sharing all its data and letting everybody know exactly how the covid-19 virus began, or does she believe that China is covering it up?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend speaks with a passion that we all know and respect. I am not the expert on this, but there is much commentary on whether there is the full clarity and transparency that we have seen from some countries. Indeed, when I talk about wanting to be able to build stronger, collective co-operation and mutual accountability, that is one of the reasons why we want to support the development of this new pandemic instrument.

I will try to tackle some of the concerns about the proposed instrument that are raised and highlighted in the petition. First, I would like to be clear that no text has yet been agreed. The process of drafting and negotiating it is ongoing, and we certainly do not expect the text to be agreed before May next year. It is a member state-led process, with member states negotiating the treaty, not the WHO. The WHO secretariat is supporting the process; it is a technical and bureaucratic system.

Colleagues have mentioned changes to the international health regulations, which are an important legal framework intended to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease commensurate with the public health risk involved. Indeed, it also helps to avoid unnecessary interference with international trade flows, so economies continue to be as strong as they can be under such pressures.

The UK and other WHO member states adopted the current version of the IHRs in 2005. They came into force in UK law in 2007. Negotiations on targeted amendments are looking to improve the framework in the light of the covid-19 lessons learnt. To be clear, the UK is right at the heart of those negotiations. We will work for good outcomes for the UK and for all member states, which we wish to work with and support.

Andrew Bridgen: My right hon. Friend says that amendments are being brought forward on the basis of lessons learnt, but does she not agree that WHO has refused to have an investigation into how it handled itself or into its recommendations during the pandemic? How can we have knowledge where it went right or wrong if it will not have a review of its own performance?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I think we have all looked closely at that. My hon. Friend highlights a question, but the whole point of the negotiations and discussions is that all member states bring their expertise and experiences to the party. As I said, the UK is at the heart of those negotiations and will look to ensure that, if a text is found that can be agreed by all member states, it is one that will meet some of those challenges and the lessons learnt that we have all identified as individual states and working together in many ways as an international community, as we have done. Importantly, once those amendments are identified, accepting them would require changes to our domestic law through legislation in the usual way. As has been discussed at some length, we are of course a sovereign state in control of whether we enter into international agreements.

Having personally spent many hours in various international negotiating fora in recent years, I know absolutely that the UK, with its voice, expertise and wisdom, and our trusted partner status with so many other member states in the UN family, is respected and listened to. Discussions continue with our officials and health experts and various other teams from across Government and, together with the leadership that we bring, that should ensure confidence in those discussions.

Esther McVey: Can the Minister reassure my constituents who are concerned that the Government will concede sovereignty and hand power to WHO? Can she give reassurances that that will not happen?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Yes, absolutely I can. The speculation that somehow the instrument will undermine UK sovereignty and give WHO powers over national public health measures is simply not the case. I absolutely reassure both my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who raised a similar issue earlier, on behalf of all their constituents: that is not the case. The UK remains in control of any future domestic decisions about public health matters—such as domestic vaccination—that might be needed in any future pandemic that we may have to manage. Protecting those national sovereign rights is a distinct principle in the existing draft text. Other Members have also identified that as an important priority, so it is good to have the opportunity of this debate, brought about by those who have concerns, to restate that that is absolutely not under threat.

To conclude, we must ensure that future pandemics—which I fear that we or our children may have to tackle—will not come with the same devastating cost as covid-19. We have the opportunity now to make real and lasting improvements to the way in which the international community prepares for, prevents and indeed responds to global health threats. The UK's voice, our scientific leadership and the strength of our democratic processes will ensure that our vision for global health planning and pandemic preparedness is at the heart of any new treaty to protect the most vulnerable.

6.39 pm

Nick Fletcher: I thank the petitioners for signing the petition. I also thank the members of the public for turning up in Parliament today. As has been seen, the topic has been well debated, and I hope that they are pleased with the outcome.

[Nick Fletcher]

I thank the Minister for her comments and her assurances. Sovereignty has been hard fought for in this country, and the Government will see that it is not something that we want to hand over lightly.

I genuinely believe that this debate has been a good one. I hope that the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response will look at the wonderful work *Hansard* does to put the debate out there and that it will realise there is an awful lot of concern. We all want to protect people across the globe; how we do it is the important part.

I thank all Members for taking part. I also thank you, Ms McDonagh, for your work as Chair.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 614335, relating to an international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

6.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 17 April 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Canada Trade Negotiations: Update

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The fifth round of UK-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations began on 20 March and concluded on 24 March. Similar to previous rounds, this was conducted in a hybrid fashion—Canadian officials travelled to London for negotiations and others attended virtually.

Technical discussions were held across 29 policy areas over 78 separate sessions. They included detailed discussions on treaty text.

Prior to the round, my counterpart Minister Mary Ng visited London, with a women-owned business delegation. We discussed the negotiations and the wider UK and Canada trade relationship, including the CPTPP negotiations. Discussions covered our respective ambitions for the deal, and we welcomed the progress made so far.

The negotiations continue to reflect our shared ambition to secure a progressive deal which strengthens our existing trading relationship, already worth over £24.8 billion in the year to Q3 of 2022.

The Government remain clear that any deal we sign will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the national health service and the services it provides are not on the table.

The sixth round of official-level negotiations is due to take place in June 2023.

The Government will continue to keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS707]

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: Conclusion of Substantive Negotiations

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The Department for Business and Trade is delighted to announce the conclusion of substantive negotiations to accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

After over 21 months of intense talks with members, the UK has successfully concluded negotiations to join CPTPP, including finalising bilateral market access negotiations with all ratified parties and successfully demonstrating our compliance with the agreement's

high standards. We have taken our time to negotiate a deal that will bring significant benefits to the UK, creating opportunities for our businesses while deepening our global trading links.

Geostrategic aspects of CPTPP

Joining will cement deeper multilateral relations with CPTPP parties while strengthening international trade. It will see us build closer ties with CPTPP nations as the world economy increasingly focuses on the dynamic Indo-Pacific region, taking the agreement from regional to truly global. This is a key aim of the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy and will help the UK engage further with the region, both on trade and from a wider foreign policy perspective.

CPTPP membership offers the opportunity to work with parties to advance our mutual ambitions. It will allow us to further promote the rules based international system and set high standards. The potential expansion of the agreement will increase the UK's reach and influence on global trade.

Benefits for UK business

CPTPP membership will create exciting new opportunities for UK businesses in key sectors. UK companies will enjoy enhanced market access to a market of over 500 million people, with a GDP of £9 trillion.

More than 99% of current UK goods exports to CPTPP members will be eligible for tariff-free trade once we have joined. Our agricultural producers stand to benefit as joining could see the UK's world class food and drink industry exporting more of its high-quality produce to some of the world's biggest markets.

Our exporters will also benefit from customs facilitation provisions. These will enable closer co-operation between border authorities. This will result in faster and more efficient processes for moving goods between the UK and CPTPP members.

Beyond tariffs and customs procedures, CPTPP will offer opportunities to firms for the diversification of supply chains and allow them to trade more easily across the Indo-Pacific region. Provisions within the agreement rules will allow our companies to take advantage of ambitious commitments on tariff liberalisation.

It is not just goods exporters who will gain from CPTPP membership. The UK's world-leading services firms will be able to make the most of CPTPP's ambitious digital provisions. The modern rules in the agreement will ensure greater levels of transparency in the sector while reducing barriers for UK companies looking to maximise their opportunities for growth in the Indo-Pacific region.

Protecting UK interests

Over the course of negotiations, the Government have taken important steps to protect our key interests. The NHS, its services and the price it pays for medicines were never on the table at any point throughout talks. Protecting the NHS is a fundamental principle of UK trade policy to which the Government are committed throughout their programme of Free Trade Agreement negotiations.

The UK has also negotiated appropriate protections for our farmers. We have arranged staged tariff reductions over a significant period of time for sensitive agricultural

goods to give producers time to adjust. We have also guaranteed permanent annual limits on tariff-free imports of beef, pork, chicken, sugar and milled rice.

The UK will not compromise its food standards by joining CPTPP. Our import requirements for food and drink will not be affected by joining the agreement and there will be no requirement to change our standards to accept products which do not conform to our current food standards, including chlorine-washed chicken or hormone-fed beef.

Next steps

The agreed text will now undergo legal review before signature of the agreement. Once the agreement is signed the Government will present an informational copy of the agreement to Parliament. As well as the text of the treaty, the Government will also provide explanatory material including an impact assessment of the deal. This approach is part of the extensive package of transparency and scrutiny measures that the Government have put in place for new trade agreements.

Once the treaty has been published, the independent Trade and Agriculture Commission will prepare its advice on the agreement.

After the Trade and Agriculture Commission report has been published, and the Government have published their own report under section 42 of the Agriculture Act 2020, the agreement will be laid before Parliament for 21 sitting days of formal scrutiny under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRAg). There will be at least three months between publication of the agreement and the commencement of the scrutiny period under CRAg.

Any legislation required to implement the agreement will need to be scrutinised and passed by Parliament in the usual ways.

[HCWS717]

CABINET OFFICE

Draft Border Target Operating Model

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Minister of State, Baroness Neville-Rolfe DBE CMG, has today made the following statement:

An important follow-up to Brexit is border controls on goods, including sanitary and phytosanitary checks critical to the protection of animal and plant health and potentially even human health. On 28 April 2022, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) announced that the UK Government decided to delay the introduction of the final set of planned controls on EU imports. We have instead worked with industry to develop a new model for imports into Great Britain. On Wednesday 5 April 2023 we published the draft “Border Target Operating Model”. We have also started a period of engagement with stakeholders across all affected sectors and all parts of the United Kingdom, and the EU, to ensure that they understand the coming changes and are ready to continue to move goods across the border on that basis.

The Model sets out the rules and processes that will apply to the importation of all goods into Great Britain. It will, for the first time, implement security and biosecurity controls on imports from the EU. These controls will ensure our environment is protected, deliver food that is safe to eat whilst maintaining security of supply for consumers, and disrupt criminal activity before it can harm our communities.

The Model will fulfil the UK’s domestic and international obligations with regard to biosecurity and public health, upholding our reputation for high regulatory standards that underpin our agri-food trading relationships. Through the UK single trade window, we will simplify the way importers provide information to Government. This is significantly less burdensome than our original plans, and it supports our wider efforts to drive UK exports.

The gradual roll-out of controls will ensure impacts and costs are managed: we will implement the Model through three major milestones, the first of which importers and their suppliers should begin to prepare for now:

31 October 2023 - The introduction of health certification on imports of medium risk animal products, plants, plant products and high risk food—and feed—of non-animal origin from the EU.

31 January 2024 - The introduction of documentary and risk-based identity and physical checks on medium risk animal products, plants, plant products and high risk food—and feed—of non-animal origin from the EU. At this point imports of sanitary and phytosanitary goods from the rest of the world will begin to benefit from the new risk based model.

31 October 2024 - Safety and security declarations for EU imports will come into force from 31 October 2024. Alongside this, we will introduce a reduced dataset for imports and use of the UK single trade window will remove duplication where possible across different pre-arrival datasets.

We will phase in controls on the west coast for Irish goods from October 2023, while ensuring that Northern Ireland businesses have unfettered access to their most important market in Great Britain, whether they move goods directly or indirectly through Ireland to Great Britain. Further to the Windsor Framework, this will entrench a significant competitive advantage for NI business on the island of Ireland, reflecting Northern Ireland’s integral place in the United Kingdom’s internal market.

Following the engagement period we will publish a final version of the Target Operating Model later this year.

[HCWS713]

TREASURY

NatWest Group: Government Shares

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):

Government’s shares in NatWest Group plc

I can inform the House that the Government have announced an extension to their existing trading plan to sell part of the Government’s shareholding in NatWest Group—NWG, formerly Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS. The current trading plan was due to end in August 2023. Following its strong progress to date in reducing the Government’s shareholding in NWG, the trading plan has been extended for a further two years, allowing sales to continue under the plan until August 2025. This announcement demonstrates continued progress towards the Government’s intention to return its NWG shareholding to private ownership by 2025-26.

Policy rationale

It is Government policy that, where a Government asset no longer serves a public policy purpose, the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to being able to achieve value for money. This frees up public resource which can be deployed to achieve other public policy objectives.

The Government are committed to returning NWG to full private ownership, given that the original policy objective for the intervention in NWG—to preserve financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. At spring Budget 2023, the Chancellor reiterated the Government's intention to fully dispose of their NWG shareholding by 2025-26.

Trading plan detail

A trading plan involves selling shares in the market through an appointed broker at market value over the duration of the plan. Trading plans are an established method of returning Government-owned shares to private ownership, while protecting value for the taxpayer. This method was used in the sale of the Government's stake in Lloyds Banking Group.

The trading plan for the Government's NWG shareholding will be extended for two years, terminating no later than 11 August 2025. Shares are only sold at a price that represents fair value and delivers value for money for the taxpayer. The final number of shares sold will depend on, among other factors, the share price and market conditions throughout the duration of the trading plan. Since the NWG trading plan was established in August 2021 it has made significant progress in reducing the Government's shareholding, with over £3.7 billion in proceeds raised from sales that have delivered value for money for the taxpayer.

UKGI and HMT will keep other disposal options under active consideration. The decision to extend the trading plan does not preclude the Government from using other disposal options to execute further transactions that achieve value for money for taxpayers.

[HCWS718]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Consultation on a Registration Scheme for Short-term Lets in England

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): The Government have published a consultation on a registration scheme for short-term lets in England, accompanied by the findings of a call for evidence held in 2022 on the development of a registration scheme.

The short-term let sector has grown significantly over the last 10 to 15 years, with the emergence of the sharing economy and the growth of digital platforms at the heart of this change. Short-term lets are now a significant part of the UK's visitor economy. They provide increased choice and flexibility for tourists and business travellers, and also those attending major sporting and cultural events.

The Government recognise that this has brought a range of benefits, such as increased choice for consumers, and increased income for individual homeowners and to local economies through increased visitor spend.

The Government want to ensure the country reaps these benefits and supports the visitor economy, while also protecting local communities and ensuring the availability of affordable housing to rent or buy.

The Government have heard the concerns of local people in tourist hotspots that they are priced out of homes to rent or to buy and need housing that is more affordable so they can continue to work and live in the place they call home. The proposed planning changes would support sustainable communities, supporting local people and businesses and local services.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committed to consult on a registration scheme for tourist accommodation in "The Tourism Recovery Plan", published in June 2021. However, given the lack of available data on short-term lets in England, it was decided to first carry out a call for evidence to gather more information on the growth of the market and its impact, in order to inform the development of options for a public consultation.

The call for evidence received almost 4,000 responses. Analysis of these responses showed that there is a need for a more consistent source of data on the number and location of short-term lets in England; and that while short-term lets create many benefits for a range of people and stakeholders, they also pose challenges for communities, particularly those located in tourism hotspots. The findings also indicated that there is broad support from across the sector for a registration scheme of short-term lets in England.

Therefore, in December 2022, the Government committed to introduce a registration scheme in England via an amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which is currently going through Parliament. This included holding a public consultation which would explore the options for how such a scheme would operate, which we have now published. Alongside the registration scheme, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has also published a separate consultation on the introduction of a planning use class for short-term lets and potential associated permitted development rights. We are also seeking views on whether it would be helpful to expressly provide a degree of flexibility for dwelling houses to be let out for 30, 60, or 90 nights in a calendar year before planning permission could be required. These changes will give local areas greater control where short-term lets are an issue and support sustainable communities. We have worked across government to ensure that the proposals are complementary and proportionate.

The Government are consulting on three possible approaches for a registration scheme, as well as a range of more detailed questions on the design of the scheme:

An opt-in scheme for local authorities, with the framework set nationally: this option is a targeted approach, recognising that any negative housing and community effects of short-term lets are felt more in some localities than others;

an opt-in scheme for local authorities with the framework set nationally, and a review point to determine whether to expand the scheme to mandatory: as above, but with the flexibility to expand the scheme to cover all of England if there is a case to do so following an evaluation; and

a mandatory national scheme, administered by one of: the English Tourist Board (VisitEngland), local authorities, or another competent authority: this option recognises the need for a level playing field in the guest accommodation sector across England.

The registration scheme is intended to improve consistency in the application of health and safety regulations, helping to boost our international reputation and attract more international visitors by giving visible

assurance that we have a high-quality and safe guest accommodation offer. It will also provide valuable data which will give local authorities information about which premises are being let out in their area, and help them to manage the housing market impact of high numbers of short-term lets, where this is an issue. This could help local authorities to apply and enforce the changes.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation, the planning changes would be introduced through secondary legislation later in the year and would apply in England only. Both of these measures are focused on short-term lets, and therefore the planning changes and the register would not impact on hotels, hostels or B&Bs.

The Government's ambition has been, and will continue to be, to ensure that we reap the benefits of short-term and holiday lets sustainably, while also protecting the long-term interests of local communities and holidaymakers in England. The publication of the consultation on a registration scheme and the analysis of the call for evidence shows our commitment to this ambition, and our progress towards developing an effective and proportionate response to the sector's concerns.

I will place a copy of the call for evidence report and the consultation document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS719]

EDUCATION

Maths Teaching

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The Prime Minister has set out a campaign to transform our national approach to maths. We are one of the few countries in the OECD where young people do not routinely study some form of maths up to the age of 18. Without a solid foundation in this subject, our young people risk being left behind and shut out of the careers to which they aspire and the lives they want to lead. We plan to change the way our system works so that everyone will study some form of maths to 18.

So, today I am announcing an expert advisory group to advise the Prime Minister and me on the essential maths knowledge and skills that young people need to study. To support the group, the Government will commission research on post-16 maths provision around the world, ensuring the curriculum in this country rivals that of the highest performing countries. Alongside this, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will work with employers to review the maths content in apprenticeships.

Since 2010, the Government have transformed the way maths is taught in schools, based on the best available international evidence, including approaches from the highest performing countries in the world. Supported by 40 maths hubs—exemplary schools in the teaching of maths—and the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics, mastery-based pedagogy from south-east Asia has been adopted by more than half of England's primary schools. In the 2019 TIMSS international survey, year 5 pupils in England achieved their highest ever maths score.

To complement evidence-based approaches to maths teaching and content, the Government introduced more challenging assessments at both primary and secondary schools, including the times tables check in year 4, new key stage 2 maths tests, and reformed GCSEs and A-levels. These assessments ensure that children are taught and master the basics of mathematics, before tackling more demanding content. The success of these approaches was reflected in England's highest mathematics PISA results for 15-year-olds in 2019.

To continue this progress, the Government are today also announcing:

An increase in the number of schools supported by the maths hubs Teaching for Mastery programme to reach 75% of primary schools and 65% of secondary schools by 2025. We will introduce intensive maths hubs support for the schools that need it most. We will also provide further support for teachers of 16 to 19-year-olds who are resitting their maths GCSE or functional skills qualifications.

An expansion of the Mastering Number programme, which helps children in the first years of primary school master the basics of arithmetic, including number bonds and times tables. This programme will be delivered by maths hubs, reaching over 8,000 schools by 2024. We will also expand the programme into years 4 and 5 to bolster fluency in times tables.

An expansion of the Taking Teaching Further programme, delivering funding for further education (FE) colleges to recruit and offer early career support to those with the relevant knowledge and industry experience to retrain as FE teachers. We will launch a financial incentive pilot this year for up to 355 teachers, targeted at some of the hardest-to-fill subjects, including maths.

A new fully funded maths National Professional Qualification for those leading maths in primary schools, teaching participants how to train other teachers to embed mastery pedagogy. We expect to make this available to all primary schools from February 2024. We will offer an updated targeted support fund for the 2023-24 academic year, providing additional funding to incentivise primary school teachers and leaders, including in the smallest schools.

Today's announcement sets out how we will deliver the Prime Minister's ambition to see all young people study maths to the age of 18 and ensure they are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the modern economy.

[HCWS715]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Achieving Smokefree 2030: Cutting Smoking and Stopping Kids Vaping

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): In 2019, this Government set the bold ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030—reducing smoking rates to 5% or less. To support this, the Government commissioned Dr Javed Khan OBE to undertake an independent review which was published in June 2022.

As I set out in a letter to colleagues on 11 April, I am pleased to be able to update the House on new action we have announced to help more people in England to quit smoking in order to meet our Smokefree 2030 ambition. We also announced further measures to protect

children from the use of vaping products, in recognition of the sharp increase in vaping among children in recent years.

One in seven adults—5.4 million people—still smoke in England, and tobacco remains the single biggest cause of preventable illness and death. Up to two out of three lifelong smokers will die from smoking, and smoking substantially increases the risk of heart disease, heart attack and stroke. Smoking also causes seven out of 10 cases of lung cancer. Tackling smoking is one of the most evidence-based and effective interventions that we can take to prevent ill health. It will improve public health, reduce the burden on the NHS, and provides substantial benefits to our workforce and the economy.

Across the country, people are concerned by the increases in youth vaping among children. It is illegal to sell vapes to under 18s and this Government want to clamp down on those businesses that rely on children buying vapes and getting them hooked on nicotine. To help combat rising levels of youth vaping, the Government have now published a youth vaping call for evidence. The call for evidence aims to identify opportunities to reduce the number of children accessing and using vapes, exploring issues such as regulatory compliance, the marketing and promotion of vape products and the environmental impact of disposable vapes. We will explore where the Government can go further, beyond what the EU's tobacco products directive allowed us to. I encourage colleagues from across the House to contribute and help inform our next steps. The call for evidence is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/youth-vaping-call-for-evidence/youth-vaping-call-for-evidence>.

While we want to ensure children do not take up vaping, we would also like to exploit the potential of vaping as a powerful tool to stop adults smoking. Vaping is substantially less harmful than smoking and our most effective quit aid—particularly when provided alongside behavioural support. That is why last week I announced that we will be supporting a million smokers to “swap to stop”, with free vaping kit—the first national scheme of its kind in the world. The scheme will run over two years initially and be targeted at the most at-risk communities first—focusing on settings such as jobcentres, homeless centres and social housing providers.

I was also pleased to announce new action to tackle illicit tobacco and vaping, as well as underage sales. Later this year, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Border Force will publish an updated strategy to tackle illicit tobacco. It will set out how we will continue to target, catch and punish those involved in the illicit market. This Government have also committed £3 million of new funding to create a specialised “illicit vapes enforcement squad” to enforce the rules on the sale of vapes, tackling illicit vapes and underage sales. This national programme will gather intelligence, co-ordinate efforts across the country, undertake test purchasing and develop guidance to build regulatory compliance.

Across England, nearly 9% of women still smoke in pregnancy. To tackle this, by next year we will offer a financial incentive to all pregnant women who smoke to support them to quit. In pilot projects these evidence-based schemes have already proven their value with a return

on investment of £4 for every £1 invested. Most importantly, they unlock a lifetime of benefits for the child and their mother.

I also announced that the Government will consult this year on introducing mandatory cigarette pack inserts, to refresh the health messaging on cigarette packets with positive messages and information to help people to quit smoking. We are exploring how best we can use modern approaches within this, such as the use of QR codes, to make it as easy as possible to get help to quit.

On 24 January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay) announced our intention to develop a major conditions strategy plan to tackle preventable ill health and mortality in England. It will focus on tackling the most prevalent conditions that contribute to morbidity and mortality in our population—cancers, cardiovascular disease, stroke and diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, dementia, mental ill health, and musculoskeletal conditions. Tackling smoking will be central to this strategy.

Through these actions, we have set out the Government plan to meeting our bold ambition to be smokefree by 2030 and respond to the Khan review. We are committed to doing all we can to give people the support they need to quit smoking, tackling the damage from the illicit market and minimising the growing threat of vaping by children.

However, we cannot do this alone. A close collaboration is needed right across the health system—including the NHS, local authorities and a range of public health stakeholders. We hope that together our efforts will act as a powerful catalyst to reduce health disparities and prevent smoking-related death, disease and despair.

[HCWS710]

Correction to Written Parliamentary Questions

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): Between May and June 2022, 13 parliamentary questions (PQs) were answered regarding the UK Health Security Agency testing covid-19 variants for a pre-exposure prophylaxis antibody therapy (tixagevimab and cilgavimab), known by the brand name Evusheld. The PQs are: PQ3627; PQ2654; HL215; HL219; PQ1507; PQ3710; PQ11547; PQ14599; HL157; PQ17128; PQ15321; HL653; and PQ691.

In simplifying the technical language, the responses to these PQs incorrectly indicated that testing was ongoing. During June, the UK Health Security Agency carried out isolation and characterisation of the BA.4 omicron variant in preparation for testing it against various compounds, which could potentially have included Evusheld. However, in the PQ responses, these activities were incorrectly interpreted as testing and the language was simplified. No further testing of Evusheld including against BA.4 omicron variant took place after 26 May 2022.

The table below summarises the testing UKHSA carried out on Evusheld.

| <i>Run Number</i> | <i>Test Week</i> | <i>Data Analysed</i> | <i>Variant/Comments</i> |
|-------------------|----------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| <i>CVA00056</i> | <i>25 April 2022</i> | <i>3 May 2022</i> | <i>Omicron BA.2</i> |
| <i>CVA00057</i> | <i>3 May 2022</i> | <i>11 May 2022</i> | <i>Omicron BA.2</i> |
| <i>CVA00058</i> | <i>9 May 2022</i> | <i>15 May 2022</i> | <i>Omicron BA.2</i> |
| <i>CVA00059</i> | <i>16 May 2022</i> | <i>22 May 2022</i> | <i>Omicron BA.2</i> |
| <i>CVA00060</i> | <i>23 May 2022</i> | <i>No analysis required because previous data captured on CVA00059 was sufficient.</i> | <i>Testing ceased 26 May 2022</i> |

Through this WMS I am apologising for these errors and clarifying the situation with regards to the testing of Evusheld. The Department takes its responsibility for parliamentary accountability very seriously and has reviewed and amended the process for checking responses

to parliamentary questions to ensure future accuracy. The table below sets out the PQ reference, the Member or peer who asked the question and the date it was published.

| <i>PQ Reference</i> | <i>Member/Peer</i> | <i>Date Published</i> |
|---------------------|--|-----------------------|
| <i>PQ3627</i> | <i>Chris Green MP (Bolton West & Atherton)</i> | <i>24 May 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ2654</i> | <i>Amy Callaghan MP (East Dunbartonshire)</i> | <i>24 May 2022</i> |
| <i>HL215</i> | <i>Lord Mendelsohn</i> | <i>25 May 2022</i> |
| <i>HL219</i> | <i>Lord Mendelsohn</i> | <i>25 May 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ1507</i> | <i>Alex Cunningham MP (Stockton North)</i> | <i>7 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ3710</i> | <i>Alex Sobel MP (Leeds North West)</i> | <i>7 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ11547</i> | <i>Christopher Chope MP (Christchurch & East Dorset)</i> | <i>14 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ14599</i> | <i>Dan Carden MP (Liverpool Walton)</i> | <i>14 June 2022</i> |
| <i>HL157</i> | <i>Lord Mendelsohn</i> | <i>16 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ17128</i> | <i>Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP (Streatham)</i> | <i>17 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ15321</i> | <i>Catherine West MP (Hornsey & Wood Green)</i> | <i>21 June 2022</i> |
| <i>HL653</i> | <i>Lord Mendelsohn</i> | <i>20 June 2022</i> |
| <i>PQ691</i> | <i>Henry Smith MP (Crawley)</i> | <i>21 June 2022</i> |

[HCWS711]

Covid-19 Vaccine Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): His Majesty's Government (HMG) are committed to protecting people most vulnerable to covid-19 through vaccination as guided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

On 6 April 2023, HMG accepted advice from the JCVI that clinically vulnerable children in England aged 6 months to 4 years should be offered a covid-19 vaccine. I am informed that all four parts of the UK intend to follow the JCVI's advice.

Although young children are generally at low risk of developing severe illness from covid-19, infants and young children who have underlying medical conditions are over seven times more likely to be admitted to paediatric intensive care units compared to those without underlying medical conditions.

Over 1 million children aged 6 months to 4 years in the US have received at least one dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech covid-19 vaccine since June 2022. Data from the US showed no new safety concerns and the most

common side effects reported were similar to those seen with other vaccines given in this age group, such as irritability or crying, sleepiness, and fever.

The UK's independent medicines regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), approved the Pfizer-BioNTech infant vaccine for children aged 6 months to 4 years on 6 December 2022 after assessing the safety, quality, and effectiveness of the vaccine against MHRA's robust standards.

Following this authorisation, the JCVI advised that children aged 6 months to 4 years who are in a clinical risk group (as defined in the UK Health Security Agency Green Book, which sets out information for public health professionals on immunisation) should be offered the vaccine. The JCVI does not currently advise offering covid-19 vaccination to children aged 6 months to 4 years who are not in a clinical risk group.

The JCVI has advised that eligible children should be offered two doses of the vaccine, with an interval of 8 to 12 weeks between the first and second doses. The NHS in England will begin offering vaccinations to those eligible in England from mid-June.

I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG have taken on in relation to further vaccine deployment via this statement and accompanying departmental minutes laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability

undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses increases the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

The extension to this cohort of children aged 6 months to 4 years creates a new contingent liability under the indemnities in the existing vaccine supply agreement between HMG and Pfizer.

Deployment of effective vaccines to eligible groups has been and remains a key part of the Government strategy to manage covid-19. Given the terms on which developers have been willing to supply a covid-19 vaccine, we, along with other nations have taken a broad approach to indemnification proportionate to the situation we are in.

Even though the covid-19 vaccines have been developed at pace, at no point and at no stage of development has safety been bypassed. These vaccines have satisfied, in full, all the necessary requirements for safety, effectiveness, and quality.

We are providing indemnities in the very unexpected event of any adverse reactions that could not have been foreseen through the robust checks and procedures that have been put in place.

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when other covid-19 vaccines or additional doses of vaccines already in use in the UK are deployed.

[HCWS708]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Reforms to the Process of Certifying Claims as Clearly Unfounded

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): On 13 December 2022, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made a statement on tackling illegal migration and a clear plan to bring the system back into balance.

Under our immigration system, where we refuse an asylum or human rights claim which is so clearly without substance that it is bound to fail, we can certify it as clearly unfounded under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. Where the claimant is from a designated safe country the claim must be certified as clearly unfounded unless the decision maker is satisfied it is not clearly unfounded. Following the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, cases certified as clearly unfounded do not have a right of appeal.

When the power under section 94 was introduced in 2002, the then Labour Government gave an undertaking to Parliament that every case certified as clearly unfounded would be looked at by two specially trained officials, with additional quality checks on top of that.

This Government believe it is important to have procedures in place to ensure that those who make clearly unfounded human rights and asylum claims are quickly removed from the UK. That is why only specially trained caseworkers can decide that a claim should be certified. However, the current requirement for a second check to be conducted by a different Home Office official on every certified decision is delaying the conclusion

of claims which are bound to fail. We must maximise our capacity to progress clearly unfounded cases in a more efficient way.

For these reasons, protection and human rights claims which are certified under section 94 as clearly unfounded will no longer have to be checked by a second specially trained official. This change will help ensure that the Home Office can certify unfounded cases more efficiently under section 94, so that those who have no basis to be in the UK can be swiftly removed.

The Home Office already operates a robust quality assurance framework for non-certified decisions which helps to maintain the quality of casework decisions and expertise. The specific quality check undertaken for section 94 decisions is no longer necessary, therefore we are improving the assurance process and aligning it with checks adopted on other decisions. Claims certified under section 94 will be regularly reviewed which will ensure that the certification process continues to be applied with careful scrutiny.

[HCWS716]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Tackling Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): On 31 March, my Department announced the outcome of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to Tackle Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, which ran from December 2022 to January 2023.

This competition is a cornerstone of the £127 million UK Shared Prosperity Fund Northern Ireland Investment Plan, launched in December 2022, in which my Department outlined the ambition of the fund to invest in Northern Ireland's priorities, target funding where it is needed most: building pride in place; supporting pay, employment and productivity growth; supporting high quality skills training; and increasing life chances.

I am pleased to confirm that we have committed over £57 million to projects over the next two years from the Northern Ireland allocation, in excess of the £42 million set out in December, reflecting this Government's commitment to support many more people to move from economic inactivity into sustainable employment.

My Department has recognised the high prevalence of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK. It is a significant barrier to a well-functioning labour market; it dampens growth, aggravates the shortage of workers in key sectors, and negatively impacts the quality of life of those who are economically inactive. That is why we made the Tackling Economic Inactivity competition our leading priority.

This funding from the UK Government will support 18 projects to provide specialist support to over 25,000 people right across Northern Ireland to help them address their barriers and move closer to securing sustainable and life-enhancing employment.

This will include bespoke support for people with disabilities, young people who are not in education, employment, or training, and others from all walks of life, who want to return to the labour market but have barriers preventing them from doing so.

By providing holistic support for the hardest to reach in the Northern Ireland labour market, the successful projects announced today will help tackle some of the most intractable barriers to finding a job and sustaining employment, and encourage growth in local economies right across Northern Ireland.

Full details of the successful projects can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-northern-ireland>.

[HCWS714]

TRANSPORT

Smart Motorway Schemes: Cancellation

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper):

The Government have announced that all plans for new smart motorways have been cancelled.

This will mean that the 11 schemes already paused from the second road investment strategy (2020-25) and the three earmarked for construction during the third road investment strategy (2025-30) will be removed from the Government's road building plans in recognition of the current lack of public confidence felt by drivers and cost pressures.

While no new stretches will be converted, work on the M56 J6-8 and M6 J21a-26 will go ahead as planned given they are already over three quarters constructed.

The Government and National Highways will continue to invest £900 million in further safety improvements on existing smart motorways. This includes installing stopped vehicle detection technology on every all lane running smart motorway which has now been completed, adding an additional 150 emergency areas across the network by 2025, and investing in giving motorists clear advice when using existing smart motorways.

The Government will also continue to deliver against their other commitments as set out in their response to the Transport Select Committee in January 2022.

This Government will continue to ensure that our roads remain among the safest in the world—helping drivers not just to be safe, but crucially, to feel safe and confident when driving.

The following schemes have been cancelled.

RIS2 (2020-2025) paused schemes

New all lane running smart motorways:

M3 J9-14

M40/M42 interchange M62 J20-25 M25 J10-16

Dynamic hard shoulder to all lane running conversions:

M1 Junction 10 -13

M4-M5 interchange (M4 Junction 19-20 and M5 Junction 15-17)

M6 Junction 4-5

M6 Junction 5-8

M6 Junction 8-10a

M42 Junction 3a-7

M62 Junction 25-30

RIS3 (2025-30) pipeline schemes

M1 North Leicestershire

M1 junctions 35A-39 Sheffield to Wakefield

M6 junctions 19-21A Knutsford to Croft

[HCWS712]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Inclusive Britain Progress Report

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch):

On 17 March 2022 we published “Inclusive Britain”, our response to the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. It sets out a groundbreaking two-year plan to tackle entrenched disparities, level up communities and promote unity. It contains 74 tailored actions to tackle long-standing disparities in education, health, criminal justice and the workplace. I committed to reporting back to Parliament on progress after 12 months.

I am today publishing an update on the substantial progress we have made in delivering the Inclusive Britain action plan. This report is based around the three ambitious aims of Inclusive Britain: building a stronger sense of trust and fairness in our institutions; promoting equality of opportunity, encouraging aspiration and empowering individuals; and fostering and instilling a sense of belonging in the UK.

I am pleased to report that we have, to date, completed 32 of the actions and continue to make good progress in delivering the remainder. Particular highlights include:

Publishing today new guidance for employers on how to measure, report on and address any ethnicity pay gaps within their workforce;

Funding a national recruitment campaign to find more adoptive parents, including those from an ethnic minority background, to improve adoption rates for ethnic minority children;

Supporting a number of police forces to trial the effect of an automatic opt-in for young people to receive independent legal advice in police custody, which we hope will lead to better outcomes for young people;

Publishing our ambitious schools White Paper and providing targeted support for those pupils who need it, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged; and

Publishing today updated guidance on positive action so that employers who use this measure to widen opportunities can do so in a way that is consistent with equalities legislation.

The recent Casey review and the Children's Commissioner's report on the strip-search of children have shown that there is more to be done to tackle disparities and to build trust in our institutions. We will continue our work to deliver the remaining actions in Inclusive Britain over the next 12 months. We will also tie this into some major landmarks this year, including the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, in order to further promote and celebrate our diversity as a nation.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and I will report back to Parliament in 12 months' time on the further progress we have made in implementing this ambitious action plan and our work to build a stronger, fairer and more united society.

[HCWS709]

Petitions

Monday 17 April 2023

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Coal, oil and gas extraction

The petition of residents of the constituency of Macclesfield.

Declares that all new coal, oil and gas extraction projects in the UK should be ruled out.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to rule out all new coal, oil and gas extraction projects in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc. — [*Presented by David Rutley, Official Report, 23 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 10P.*]

[P002798]

Observations from The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart):

Putin's weaponisation of energy has shown how we need to be less reliant on imported fossil fuels. The new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's mission is to replace them with cheap, clean, secure British energy sources. We will be increasingly powered by renewables including wind and solar, hydrogen, power with carbon capture, usage and storage (CCUS) and new nuclear plants.

Our recently announced plan, Powering Up Britain, is another significant step forward. It outlines how the Government plan to secure our energy system by ensuring a resilient and reliable supply, increase our energy efficiency, and bring bills down through decisive actions to increase Britain's low carbon domestic electricity supply. It reduces our reliance on fossil fuels for heating and transport. It continues UK leadership in securing the economic benefits of the energy transition, including through major investment in CCUS.

At the centre of our coal policy is our commitment to phase out coal from our electricity generation by 2024. Coal's share of our electricity supply has already declined from almost 40% in 2012 to around 2% in 2021.

Although coal will soon no longer be part of our electricity system, there may continue to be demand for coal in industries such as steel and cement and for heritage railways. The current licensing arrangements leave room for domestic demand to be met through our own resources.

Oil and natural gas are an essential resource as we transition to net zero. We need a more nuanced view of oil and gas. We cannot simply stop using them overnight, as the independent Climate Change Committee has recognised. Even when we meet our net zero targets in 2050, we will still be using a quarter of the gas we currently use now, and we will still need oil for manufacturing essential products such as plastics, medicines and fertiliser.

The Government's landmark North Sea Transition Deal is putting the sector on a path to deliver a net zero basin by 2050. The Government are also supporting carbon capture technologies to ensure that the continued use of these important transition fuels that underpin our secure energy system will be as low-carbon as possible. These actions are helping to ensure that we meet our 2050 net zero target and play our part in limiting global temperature rises to 1.5°, as mandated by the Paris Agreement and Glasgow Climate Pact.

The natural decline of many of the UK's offshore fields means that the UK is likely to remain a net importer of both oil and gas; a faster decline in domestic production would mean importing more oil and gas. The production of natural gas from the UK continental shelf creates less than half as much greenhouse gas as imported liquefied natural gas; so curbing UK gas production would likely lead to an increase in carbon emissions rather than the reverse.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Spinneyfields Specialist Care Centre Closure

The petition of the residents of Wellingborough, Rushden, and the surrounding areas.

Sheweth, that the petitioners are deeply concerned by West Northamptonshire Council's decision to close Spinneyfields Specialist Care Centre on 29th January 2023; notes that Northamptonshire's two acute hospitals, Kettering General Hospital and Northampton General Hospital have on average over 200 people a day who are medically fit to be discharged but cannot be; further notes that Spinneyfields is a 51-bed step-down facility and has the potential to provide essential additional capacity in step-down care locally.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your honourable House urges the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to work with Northamptonshire's Integrated Care Board, West Northamptonshire Council and North Northamptonshire Council to utilise Spinneyfields Specialist Care Centre as a step-down facility accepting discharges from Northamptonshire's acute hospitals.

And your petitioners, as duty bound, will ever pray, &c.— [*Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 7 February 2023; Vol. 727, c. 879.*]

[P002801]

Observations from The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately):

The Government are aware that Spinneyfields is one of four specialist short-term care centres in West Northamptonshire and that, following an extensive period of discussion with local stakeholders, the local authority has taken the difficult decision to close the centre as it has remained underutilised. The Secretary of State met my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) to discuss this case.

Local authorities are best placed to understand, plan for, and make decisions about, the care and support needs of their local population. That is why, under the Care Act 2014, local authorities are tasked with the duty to shape their care market to ensure a diverse and sustainable range of high-quality care services are provided.

Local authorities also have a temporary duty, under the Care Act, to ensure continuity of care if a provider exits the market. This is to ensure that people continue to receive the care and support they need. The Department regularly monitors the risks to provider viability and continuity of care in England, and despite the pressures the market faces, the number of adult social care locations registered with the Care Quality Commission has remained stable.

On 9 January, the Department announced up to £200 million to fund short-term NHS step-down care packages. Integrated Care Boards, working closely with local authorities, will use this to purchase places in care homes and other settings, such as hospices, as well as to help fund wrap-around primary and community health services to support patients' recovery. NHS England expects that this will allow an additional 2,500-3,000 patients to be discharged from hospitals into other care settings, freeing up much-needed acute beds and clinical capacity. This funding is specifically for short term care and will be used to purchase a maximum of four weeks of bedded care per patient.

The guidance for the £200 million discharge funding can be found at the following link:
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PRN00124-ii-Hospital-discharge-fund-guidance.pdf>

The Department also provided £500 million to support discharge from hospital into social care and intermediate care over December-March 2022-23. The funding was shared between local authorities and NHS Integrated Care Boards, through the Better Care Fund. Local areas were required to use the funding to reduce the number of delayed discharges and bed days lost to delayed discharge, with flexibility over how they do that, taking account of the local context. Many local areas chose to spend that funding on bedded provision, although that was a local decision. A further £600 million will be distributed in 2023-24 and £1 billion in 2024-25 through the Better Care Fund to support safe and timely discharge from hospital into adult social care, including reducing the number of delayed discharges. The funding will be split between local authorities and NHS Integrated Care Boards and pooled through the Better Care Fund framework.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing and drug and alcohol treatment in Hull

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kingston Upon Hull,

Declares that they consider that levels of anti-social behaviour in the constituency are growing at a rapid rate.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider reallocating funding for both the Police and drug and alcohol treatment in Kingston Upon Hull to restore it to 2010 levels in order to reduce anti-social behaviour.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dame Diana Johnson, *Official Report*, 27 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 801.]

[P002818]

Observations from the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The Government are committed to tackling and preventing antisocial behaviour (ASB). The Government know the serious impact that persistent ASB can have on both individuals and the wider community.

On 27 March the Government published the ASB Action Plan. The ASB Action Plan commits to tackling ASB across five key themes: stronger punishment, making communities safer, building local pride, prevention and early intervention, improving data, reporting and accountability for action. Cracking down on antisocial behaviour works in tandem with this Government's priorities to prevent more murders, drive down violent crime, including against women and girls, and burglaries.

This plan is backed by £160 million of funding. This includes up to £60 million to fund an increased police and other uniformed presence to clamp down on antisocial behaviour, targeting hotspots. Initially this will be in 10 police force areas, but from 2024 will support a hotspot approach across every police force area in England and Wales, which will see thousands of additional patrols taking place in places blighted by antisocial behaviour. The Government are delivering £10 million of additional funding in 23-24 for 10 Police and Crime Commissioners to establish new Immediate Justice pathways aimed at delivering swift, visible punishment for anti-social behaviour. This will be rolled out to all police force areas in 2024-25.

Through legislation, the Government are bringing in a number of changes to tackle drug misuse. Nitrous Oxide—laughing gas—will be banned under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Police powers will be extended to enable them to drug test suspected criminals in police custody for a wider range of drugs, including ecstasy and methamphetamine. It will be easier to test in cases linked to crimes like violence against women and girls, serious violence, and antisocial behaviour.

The Government are also consulting on key ASB powers to ensure they are as effective as possible and will prohibit begging where it is causing a public nuisance.

The Government have an ambitious programme of activity underway to tackle alcohol-related crime and work with police and licensing stakeholders to ensure thriving and safe night-time economies. The Government are piloting a training programme to help frontline practitioners identify where alcohol misuse and domestic abuse are cooccurring and to facilitate greater join-up with GPs and police.

Humberside Police's funding will be up to £231.7 million in 2023-24, an increase of up to £7.9 million when compared to 2022-23. As at 31 December 2022, Humberside had recruited 299 additional uplift officers against a total three-year allocation of 322 officers. The force has been allocated 129 additional uplift officers in the final year of the uplift.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

London & Quadrant Housing Trust

The petition of residents in Acton Gardens in Ealing Central and Acton

Declares that residents have growing concerns about the year-on-year increases of their service charges being requested by London & Quadrant Housing Trust (L&Q)

without providing transparent and timely responses on the reasons for these increases; notes that this has been compounded annually by the lack of answers from L&Q, resulting in stress and continued frustration on the growing scale of concerns residents are facing, including items such as: repairs to security systems which aid to reduce the growing ASB in the area, sinking fund cost spiralling out of control, faulty energy and hot water supplies that continue to occur, lack of clear service level agreements and communication processes to manage residents repairs and issues.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the difficulties faced by Acton Gardens residents, and leaseholders who have been fighting for increased transparency of service charge accounts and expenditure and take immediate action to ensure that leaseholders who seek transparency of service charge accounts are granted that transparency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Rupa Huq, *Official Report*, 13 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 662.]

[P002815]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean):

The Government are committed to creating a fairer and more transparent housing system that works for everyone. Leasehold and commonhold reform supports our mission to level up homeownership by addressing power imbalance at the heart of the leasehold system.

We believe very strongly that any fees and charges should be justifiable, transparent, and communicated effectively and that there should be a clear route to redress if things go wrong. The law is clear that variable service charges must be reasonable and, where costs relate to work or services, the work or services must be of a reasonable standard. Leaseholders may make an application to the First-tier Tribunal in England to make a determination on the reasonableness of their service charges.

There are two Government approved codes of practice which outline best practice for managing agents, landlords or other relevant parties in relation to residential leasehold property management. Both documents can be taken into account as evidence at court and First-tier Tribunal hearings, including hearings on the reasonableness of service charges. The two codes of practice are the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Code of Practice available at:

www.rics.org/uk/upholding-professional-standards/sector-standards/real-estate/service-charge-residential-management-code/

and the Association of Retirement Housing Managers Code of Practice, which is available at:

www.arhm.org/publication-category/code-of-practice/.

Many landlords and managing agents already demonstrate good practice and provide significant and relevant information to leaseholders. However, too many landlords are failing to provide sufficient information or clarity to leaseholders. The Government established an independent working group, chaired by Lord Best, to raise standards across the property agent sector and which considered how fees such as service charges should be presented to consumers.

The group reported back to Government in July 2019. To improve the transparency of service charge information for consumers, the group suggested that the Government should consider consulting on the detail and use of a new mandatory standardised charges form for both leaseholders and freeholders, and should also explore standardising both the information that is presented and the form—the full report is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulation-of-property-agents-working-group-report>.

The Government recognise that the existing statutory requirements do not yet go far enough to enable leaseholders to identify and challenge unfair costs. We will take action to support and empower leasehold homeowners.

Increased transparency will help leaseholders better understand what they are paying for, make it harder for landlords to hide unreasonable or unfair charges, and enable leaseholders to challenge more effectively their landlord if the fees are unreasonable.

The Social Housing Regulation Bill gives the Regulator of Social Housing new standard-setting powers relating to the provision of information to residents by registered providers, such as London & Quadrant Housing Trust. We will also be introducing an Access to Information Scheme that will enable tenants of private registered providers to request information from their landlords in a similar way to the Freedom of Information Act.

We have also strengthened the Housing Ombudsman Service, so social housing residents have somewhere to turn when they are not getting the answers they need from their landlords. The Social Housing Regulation Bill will ensure that the power for the Ombudsman to issue a code of practice on complaint handling is set out explicitly in statute alongside duties to consult on any code issued and monitor the compliance of member landlords with the code. This will emphasise and add weight to the importance of good complaint handling practices. In addition, we have changed the law so that residents can now complain directly to the Ombudsman instead of having to wait eight weeks while their case is handled by a local MP or other ‘designated person’.

TRANSPORT

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and road tax

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk.

Declares that the petitioners believe that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) is there to equally service non-disabled and disabled drivers; further that most members of the public will be unaware that drivers who qualify for a 50% discount on their road tax due to being in receipt of standard rate PIP must make an application via post; and further that the petitioners feel that all drivers should equally be able to apply for road tax via post, online or at the Post Office.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to instruct the DVLA to permit all drivers to apply for road tax by whichever method is most convenient for them.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 15 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 932.]

[P002812]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Transport (Richard Holden):

Information about individuals in receipt of the personal independence payment (PIP) is held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Those in receipt of enhanced PIP where no vehicle excise duty payment is required can use the DVLA's online and post office vehicle licensing services. Such vehicles are licensed in

the disabled tax class. However customers who receive the standard rate of PIP pay vehicle excise duty at 50 per cent of the rate applicable to the tax class of their individual vehicle. To provide an online service for these customers requires significant technical developments to be made. The DVLA continues to work with the DWP on how this process can be improved and delivered online.

Ministerial Corrections

CABINET OFFICE

Monday 17 April 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Unpaid Work Trials

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Unpaid Work Trials on 29 March 2023.

Kevin Hollinrake: In 2021, HMRC returned more than £6.7 million in arrears to over 155,000 workers, and issued fines totalling more than £14 million to businesses that had failed to pay the minimum wage.

[Official Report, 29 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 361WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave in the debate on Unpaid Work Trials.

The correct statement should have been:

Kevin Hollinrake: In **2020-21**, HMRC returned more than **£16.7 million** in arrears to over 155,000 workers, and issued fines totalling more than £14 million to businesses that had failed to pay the minimum wage.

Afghan Resettlement Update

The following is an extract from the Afghan Resettlement Update statement on Tuesday 28 March 2023.

Johnny Mercer: All the numbers are publicly available. We reckon that about 4,300 entitled personnel remain **in Afghanistan** and want to get over here, and 12,100 have arrived to date on the ARAP scheme.

[Official Report, 28 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 844.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Veterans' Affairs:

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) in the Afghan Resettlement Update statement.

The correct response should have been:

Johnny Mercer: All the numbers are publicly available. We reckon that about 4,300 entitled personnel remain **in Afghanistan and third countries** and want to get over here, and 12,100 have arrived to date on the ARAP scheme.

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**not later than
Monday 24 April 2023**

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