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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 25 May 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 25 May 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Nature Loss

1. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps her Department plans to take to reverse nature loss. [905116]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):** I direct the hon. Lady to read the environmental improvement plan, which has 262 pages of comprehensive cross-Government actions we will take to meet the legally binding targets this Government put in place to restore nature. Copies of the plan can be found in the House of Commons Library.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Nearly half of the UK's nature has been destroyed, which is well above the global average. In response to a 2021 report on biodiversity loss, the Government pledged that they would leave nature in a better state than they found it. Yet since that pledge, no firm targets have been set to improve our declining nature. Will the Minister support my Ecology Bill, which has widespread support across the House and would require her to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030?

**Trudy Harrison:** The Environment Act 2021 could have no stronger target, and throughout the 262 pages of the environmental improvement plan we explain the legal targets, including on tree canopy cover and on improvements to water, air quality and our soil. We are also making significant progress with our environmental land management scheme, which will reward farmers for their environmental stewardship.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the news, announced last week, that the West Midlands Combined Authority is to receive £1 million from the natural capital programme. Will the Minister outline how the programme, working with local authorities and Andy Street, the West Midlands Mayor, will help to tackle nature loss and benefit local people in my constituency?

**Trudy Harrison:** Absolutely. That is a fine example of how local authorities are providing the support for nature that we need. As we roll out our local nature recovery strategies across all 48 upper tier authorities in England very soon, we will see start to see how the collaboration between authorities, environmental non-government organisations, charities, our farmers and communities will halt the decline of nature by 2030.

#### Food Prices in Supermarkets

3. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with supermarkets on ensuring that reductions in wholesale food costs are reflected in food prices. [905119]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** The Department meets regularly with food retailers to discuss a range of issues, including the impact of food inflation. Most recently, on Tuesday the Chancellor and the Secretary of State met a number of food and drink manufacturers. We will continue that engagement to ensure consumers have access to a range of affordable food, in recognition of the pressures people are feeling at home.

**Michael Fabricant:** I thank the Minister for his answer. My constituents in Lichfield and Burntwood, and people in the rest of the country, are enduring high food inflation, as are those in the rest of Europe. What controls—if that is the word—do we have to ensure supermarkets do not take unfair advantage and excess profits from wholesale prices?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Retailers work to ensure strong that competitive pressure remains in the marketplace. However, the Competition and Markets Authority announced last week that it is looking into the grocery sector to see whether any failure in competition is contributing to prices being higher than they would normally be. The CMA will focus on areas where people are experiencing greater cost of living pressures. My hon. Friend will also be aware that the Groceries Code Adjudicator will remain separate from the CMA and can take up investigations should it choose to do so.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Food price inflation remains at the eye-wateringly high level of 19%, causing misery to millions. The UK Farm to Fork summit provided an opportunity to tackle inflationary pressures across the supply chain, but the Secretary of State's written statement did not mention inflation once. Can the Minister say if there is a plan to rapidly reduce food price inflation—and if not, why not?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that one of the Prime Minister's main targets is to reduce inflation. Clearly, food makes up a huge part of that inflationary pressure. Pressures in global markets are driving up energy and food, not least because of Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, but we are working closely with retailers, producers and processors to ensure we can strip out as many of those pressures as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the shadow Minister.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Food inflation is running at almost 2%, lower-standard imported eggs are on supermarket shelves because our producers are being undercut, and today record immigration numbers are announced, but the wrong people—we do not have the people to produce food in our fields. What are the Minister and the Secretary of State, who are responsible for our food system, doing about all that? Are they just innocent bystanders?

**Mark Spencer:** Once again, the hon. Gentleman is a little disingenuous. The immigration figures were partly driven by people coming from Ukraine and Hong Kong. I recognise that we need help and support in the labour market. That is why the Government have issued 45,000 visas, with an extra 10,000 top-up not only for this year—we have already have stated we will do that again next year—to give growers and producers the opportunity to source the labour they need to harvest vegetables and fruit.

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

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Last week's most vaunted Farm to Fork Summit, from which the Scottish Government were excluded, was described as an "empty meeting" by food and farming industry representatives, with no action on price or food inflation discussed, and one that

"did not touch on the fundamental problems of food price inflation".

In addition, Ministers offered no commitment in response to a call by the National Farmers Union to stop Britain's self-sufficiency in food slipping below its current level of 6%. Does the Minister agree with the National Farmers Union's assessment of the summit? If not, what concrete outcomes does he think it achieved on food price reduction?

**Mark Spencer:** I do not know whether the hon. Lady lives in a different universe, because the NFU welcomed the food summit. It requested it and it was grateful that it took place. It was a huge success, pulling together retailers, processors and primary producers to get under the skin of the challenges that we face as a country. We will solve those challenges by working together. Many people celebrated that Farm to Fork Summit, as should she, rather than criticising it.

### Fresh Food and Drinks: Duty and Customs

4. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the duty and customs regime following the UK's exit from the EU on the fresh food and drinks sector. [905121]

7. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the duty and customs regime following the UK's exit from the EU on the fresh food and drinks sector. [905124]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** The Government recognise the importance of trade in the food and drink sector.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regularly reviews UK import and export trade statistics, including from the European Union. In April, the Government presented their draft border target operating model for all goods imports into Great Britain. To ensure enough time for proper preparedness, we will implement the model across three milestones between the end of October and 31 October 2024. In the longer term, the UK single trade window will enable all information required to import and export goods to be submitted to border agencies through one interface, further simplifying the process for traders.

**Kirsten Oswald:** In recent years, Scotland has grown a third of all the UK's soft fruits. However, exports have been quashed because of Brexit, with UK fruit exports falling by more than half, from £248.5 million in the year ending March 2021 to £113.8 million in the year ending March 2023. Given that Scottish food perishables travel further to Dover and are more sensitive to delays among the sanitary and phytosanitary arrangements, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to remove the Brexit barriers to trade that her Government have imposed on Scottish businesses?

**Dr Coffey:** It is the European Union that has put certain checks in place in its export arrangements. We have had a pretty open door since we left the European Union, which is why we are implementing the target operating model to ensure that we introduce further controls, mindful of the biosecurity risks that we face.

**Deidre Brock:** Mike Park, the chief executive officer of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, told *The New York Times* that his industry members were the "poster boys" of Brexit, but now admit that Brexit has delivered nothing, saying:

"It has left some very negative legacies and hasn't provided any of the positives we were promised."

Given the latest polling shows that only 9% think that the decision to leave the EU was more of a success than a failure and 62% describe it as more of a flop, and given the damage to Scotland's global fresh food and drinks sector, can the Secretary of State finally agree that the only Brexit growth our economy is experiencing is in managed decline?

**Dr Coffey:** What can I say? Rubbish. The quota for British fishermen, including Scottish fishermen, has gone up since we left the European Union. We have signed new trade deals, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership being the latest. We have announced an extra five agricultural attachés around the world, making 16 in total, who will promote great British food, including fish, around the world.

### Bathing Waters

5. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support bathing waters. [905122]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** There are now 424 designated bathing sites. Four new sites have been added this year, including two in Rutland Water, one in Plymouth and

one in my own constituency, on the River Deben, near Waldringfield. That is the highest number of bathing water sites we have ever had.

My right hon. Friend will be aware that bathing water sites are designated on the basis of how many people bathe there rather than water quality. However, thanks to targeted regulation and investment of £2.5 billion, we have made excellent progress in improving bathing water quality at existing sites, such that 93% of bathing waters were classified as good or excellent last year, up from just over 70% in 2010.

**Philip Dunne:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her answer. She will be aware that last week, Water UK announced that water companies will support applications for 100 sites on inland waterways to achieve the bathing water standard. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Environment Agency is resourced to facilitate monitoring of those sites on their journey to achieve that important designation of clean water in our rivers?

**Dr Coffey:** I assure my right hon. Friend that the Environment Agency will do the monitoring that is expected for all designated bathing water sites. I welcome what the water companies said last week—both their apology and their proposal to support more inland waterways to achieve the bathing water designation. However, let us be clear: the money announced by the water companies was what we were expecting, to comply with the storm overflows discharge reduction plan that we have already set in place. We will continue to ensure that the regulations promote bathing water sites, but the ultimate benefit of subsequent targeting and interventions will be improved water quality.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for backing my campaign to designate Devil's Point and Firestone bay in Plymouth as bathing waters. I am now targeting a sewage outlet that is pumping raw human sewage into Plymouth Sound all year round. Is it time to look again at the period during which water testing takes place in official bathing waters, and extend it from the period of 15 May to 30 September, since wild swimmers like me swim in bathing waters all year round, not just in the summer season?

**Dr Coffey:** The dates set down are pretty consistent across much of Europe, as the original regulations that we signed up to came from Europe. The dates reflect the fact that more people tend to go swimming in the summer, so bathing water sites are designated on that basis, although people will swim in different parts of the country all year around. I am pleased that Plymouth was granted that status, and I am sure people will welcome the extra investment that is likely to follow as a consequence.

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

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Three weeks ago, the Secretary of State led Tory MPs through the voting lobby to vote down Labour's Bill that would have finally ended the Tory sewage scandal by making polluters pay. Last week, water companies apologised for their part in the Tory sewage scandal. Given her own track record, more recently and previously

as water Minister, overseeing a doubling of sewage dumping, will she now do the right thing and apologise? Will she right that wrong by following Labour's lead to ensure that water company dividends, not bill payers, cover the costs of ending the Tory sewage scandal?

**Dr Coffey:** I think the hon. Gentleman might need to correct the record. The Government did not vote down a Bill; what we voted down was the Labour party trying to take control of the Order Paper. During that debate, we pointed out the inadequacy of the Bill and how the plan referred to in the long title was already under way, so his Bill was nugatory. The hon. Gentleman also seemed to forget about the Welsh Labour Government and the fact that there is greater frequency of sewage outflow usage in Wales than in England. Somehow that was left out of the debate, because the hon. Gentleman did not realise the issue was devolved.

I remind the House that it was not a Labour Government who introduced the monitoring of storm overflows. Indeed, a Labour Government introduced self-monitoring by water companies in 2009, after they were taken to court by the European Union. We should be clear that we have now seen an increase in monitoring, and by the end of the year over 91% of storm overflows will be monitored. That has unveiled the scourge of this scandal. Frankly, it is Labour Members and previous Labour Ministers who should hang their heads in shame about looking the other way.

### Waste Incineration

**6. Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the environmental impact of waste incineration. [905123]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** We want to see less waste being sent to incinerators, which is why we set a statutory target to halve the 2019 level of residual waste by 2042. The Environment Agency inspects and audits energy from waste plants to ensure that they are complying with the requirements of their environmental permits, which include strict emissions limits and associated strict requirements to monitor those limits.

**Elliot Colburn:** Only about 20% of the waste that goes into the Beddington incinerator in my constituency is plastic, but it makes up three quarters of the harmful particulates that come out of the chimney stacks. Technology is available to extract plastic before it is burnt, and is being trialled around the country. Does the Minister agree that all waste incineration plants should be installing this technology as soon as possible?

**Rebecca Pow:** We have legislated to prevent incinerators from accepting separately collected paper, metal, glass and plastic unless they have gone through a recycling facility first. We are trying to reduce all our waste but particularly plastic, and our plastic packaging reforms, which are under way, will mean that, overall, less waste will be incinerated.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): As the Minister has said, we need to reduce the amount of waste that is being incinerated. One way of doing that would be to develop a truly circular economy, which could also

result in the creation of many more green jobs. This is a DEFRA responsibility, but we do not hear much from DEFRA about its plans. Will the Minister tell us what action she is taking?

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Lady is right, and we are committed to measures to introduce a much more circular economy. We must cut the amount of resources that we use, and recycle more, reuse more and refill more. Work is under way, and data is being gathered on our extended producer responsibility scheme, which we will introduce in 2024, and the deposit return scheme will be introduced in 2025. Those, along with consistent collections, will reduce the amount of waste that we, as a society, throw away.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab):** Waste incinerators are three times more likely to be built in the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods than in the least deprived, and people in those communities are twice as likely to have a lung condition and seven times more likely to die from one. Is the Minister confident that she has enough monitoring in place to provide accurate, timely and consistent data to ensure that these incinerators do not breach our emissions targets and thus put local people at risk of further harm?

**Rebecca Pow:** It is crucial for waste incineration plants to have the correct permits and to be correctly monitored, which is why the Environment Agency has imposed strict emissions limits and applies the permit scheme to a number of pollutants to ensure that people who live near incinerators are completely safe. All operators of incinerator plants must carry out their own monitoring and report back constantly on the safety of their plants, because human health is, of course, critical.

### Species Decline

8. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** What progress her Department has made on its target to halt species decline by 2030. [905125]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):** Halting species decline is a considerable task, but one to which we are absolutely committed. Again, I recommend the perusal of our environmental improvement plan, which summarises the significant action taken so far, but let me give a few examples. We have created or restored plant and wildlife habitats equivalent to the size of Dorset, we have established 40,000 agreements with farmers on nature-friendly actions, we have 22 landscape-scale restoration projects under way, and we have benefited from the conservation status and prospects of 188 species.

**Mr Dhesi:** The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Research conducted by the Natural History Museum has revealed that when it comes to the amount of biodiversity that survives, we are at the very bottom of the list of G7 nations and among the lowest 10% globally. Thousands of badgers continue to be slaughtered unnecessarily; that, along with bee-killing neonic pesticides, has been authorised by this Government, who have also failed to act to stop illegal hunting or effectively limit peatland extraction or moorland burning. Moreover, they have missed the

legal deadline for the publication of their own environmental targets. Given all these facts, how can we now trust them to ensure that some of our most loved and iconic British animals do not become extinct?

**Trudy Harrison:** I point to the Environment Act 2021. I also point out that the real priority for species abundance is creating habitat, and in a country where 70% of our area is farmed, that is exactly why we have our environmental land management schemes. We are planting more trees and creating more habitats. We are investing £750 million to create more opportunities to plant trees and hedgerows. We are improving the air that all species breathe and improving water quality. We are putting everything we can in legal targets and interim targets, as well as in moral ambition, on the back of our environmental improvement plan.

### Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill

9. **Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** What recent discussions she has had with the Leader of the House on the parliamentary timetable for the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. [905126]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** I have spoken with the business managers and expect an announcement on the progress of the Bill very soon.

**Kevin Foster:** I note the Secretary of State's answer, but the Bill contains urgently needed animal welfare provisions on puppy smuggling and zoo regulation, so does she agree that a date to introduce these measures should be announced urgently?

**Dr Coffey:** As I just said, I expect an announcement on the progress of the Bill very soon, but I stress that animal welfare has been a priority for the Government since 2010. We have made improvements for farm animals, pets and wild animals. In 2021, we published an action plan on animal welfare, and since then we have delivered four manifesto commitments and passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 and the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021. We have provided greater protection for elephants by bringing the Ivory Act 2018 into force, and we are extending that. We have also made micro-chipping compulsory. We have supported many measures in our manifesto through the House and hopefully more will complete their passage through the other place within the next couple of months.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I welcome the Secretary of State's response. I endorse the request made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), because puppy smuggling is an important issue in Northern Ireland. We have to work together to tackle the smuggling of puppies from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland and across on to the mainland. Has the right hon. Lady had an opportunity to speak to the authorities in Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland in particular, to stop this terrible activity that goes on across all of the United Kingdom?

**Dr Coffey:** I had the great pleasure of attending the Balmoral show recently, although I admit we were more focused on farming and food, rather than aspects of

animal welfare. The police can act on a number of activities where they suspect crime is being committed, and we intend to strengthen the offences to help the police.

### Cost of Food

10. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of food. [905127]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** We have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues, and as halving inflation is one of the Government's top priorities, it is discussed regularly. Recent discussions have covered the substantial package of support from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury that is already in place, and we continue to meet retailers and producers to explore how they can further support their customers.

**Peter Grant:** Families on lower incomes have no choice but to spend a much bigger proportion of their income on basic foodstuffs than those of us who are lucky enough to be better off. With inflation for many basic foodstuffs still running at over 30%, thousands of my constituents are facing real cost of living increases that are probably double the official rate of inflation. Government targets are all very well, but my constituents cannot eat targets. Can the Minister give any indication of how much longer my constituents will have to wait until the real price of their food shopping bill comes back to what it was just two years ago?

**Mark Spencer:** Of course we recognise that challenge, and that is why we are protecting the most vulnerable households. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has introduced targeted support worth £26 billion to support those very people. More than 8 million households are eligible for means-tested benefits. They will receive extra cost of living payments totalling £900 per household in 2023-24, and over 99% of the cost of living payments for this year have already been made.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that our farm support programmes, as well as delivering crucial environmental goals, make it easier for farmers to make a living from growing food? That will feed through into lower food prices.

**Mark Spencer:** It is worth stating again that food production is the primary purpose of farming in this country. We will always back our farmers to produce great-quality, high-welfare food, but we can do that at the same time as improving our environmental output and biodiversity.

### Food Price Inflation: Food Bank Use

11. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of food price inflation on levels of demand for emergency parcels from food banks. [905128]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** As I said earlier, tackling inflation is the Government's No. 1 priority, and we have a plan to

halve inflation this year. We have provided significant support over this year, worth more than £3,500 per household. That includes direct cash payments to the most vulnerable households, as well as uprating benefits and the state pension by over 10% in April.

**Dan Carden:** According to this week's inflation data, the cost of sugar and some cooking oils is up nearly 50%, but the prices that people see in the supermarkets for some products are up 100% and above—I hope the Competition and Markets Authority will get to the bottom of that. It is no wonder that food banks are facing record levels of need for support. Between April 2022 and March 2023, the Trussell Trust distributed more than 1 million parcels to children, reaching this grim milestone for the first time in its history. What is the Department doing to ensure that, when food banks are overwhelmed, the Government are there to step in?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the household support fund. The Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced a huge £26 billion package of support for the most vulnerable households, to get them through the pressures they are feeling. We are subject to the global pressures driven by Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which has caused huge ripples not only in the UK but around Europe. We will back those people, and we will support the most vulnerable in society.

### Topical Questions

T2. [905135] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** I am pleased that we had the Farm to Fork summit in Downing Street last week, and it was a good opportunity to discuss issues such as the supply chain and trade. It brought together supermarkets, food processors and food manufacturers, as well as food growers, to have that vital discussion as we continue to try to make sure that we improve the status of farmers in our food chain.

Today, I also welcome the statistics showing that farmers' incomes are up 17% this year. I am sure we will continue to have a thriving food production industry for many years to come.

**Simon Jupp:** Homes in Newton Poppleford, Tipton St John, Metcombe and Venn Ottery in my East Devon constituency were badly damaged by recent flash floods. I went to see the residents, and the result of the flooding is heartbreaking. Insurance companies really need to step up and support those residents, who rallied around each other in very difficult circumstances. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the multi-agency response to the recent flooding, because the risk of floods in East Devon is not going anywhere?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is undoubtedly a doughty champion for his constituents, and I am very conscious of the impact that flooding can have on communities, households and businesses. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), is happy to meet him, and she has recently met the Environment Agency. We will continue to make sure

that we deliver thousands of flood schemes, which will benefit not only East Devon but every part of the country. We will also continue to try to improve the local and national response.

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

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): A year on from my request from this Dispatch Box for an urgent meeting on food security, the Government's Farm to Fork summit was described by attendees as "no more than a PR stunt" that will do nothing to help the cost of living crisis.

The Secretary of State also knows that fishing is a key pillar of our food security, but it is under grave threat on Teesside. Given that crustacean die-offs continue to cripple generations of fishers, will she join me in demanding that the inevitable "truth on Teesside" public inquiry includes this environmental and economic disaster in its terms of reference?

**Dr Coffey:** Yet again, the shadow Secretary of State does not seem to trust civil servants. Our chief scientific adviser did a thorough job of going through what has happened on Teesside and what is available. Organisations such as the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science have also looked at recent incidents, and we will continue to use our scientists to investigate, as appropriate.

I am afraid that peddling conspiracy theories is not appropriate for a shadow Secretary of State.

T6. [905139] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Seven parish councils along the River Severn from Aust to Sharpness have joined forces under the chairmanship of local resident Mr Barry Turner to ask the Environment Agency for improvements along the riverbank, in preparation for rising tide heights and more extreme weather events. Will the Minister meet me, Mr Turner and the local councillor, Matthew Riddle, to discuss their concerns and help find a solution?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** I believe the Environment Agency has already met Mr Turner and his group, and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend too. Obviously, I must stress that managing coastal change in those legacy landfill sites, some of which have historical issues, is very much the responsibility of the local coastal protection authorities. The Government are taking action, looking at what priority action we could take on these historical landfill sites to find a way forward in these many and varied areas.

T3. [905136] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Yesterday, we learned that sugar prices have risen by a massive 47% in the past year, and industry experts predict that they will rise again this autumn, because of the high energy costs of extracting and refining sugar. What steps is the Minister taking to support the food and drink sector throughout this period of extreme inflationary pressure, so that these costs are not, yet again, passed on to consumers?

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** The hon. Lady should be aware that I meet British Sugar regularly. We are keen to help and support

it with new technology, with investment in genetic technologies to improve sugar beet yields. We will continue to have those conversations. We are very much aware of the pressures on global sugar prices, which is why we need a thriving and productive sugar market here in the UK.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): My local farmers have told me that they need their seasonal worker visas extended to a nine-month period from six. Will the Department work with the Home Office to have that extended?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We are very aware of the challenges those businesses are facing, which is why we have increased the number of visas. We have also rolled over 45,000 visas to next year, with an extra 10,000 if required. We will continue to have conversations with our friends at the Home Office on how we can best support that sector.

T4. [905137] **Dan Jarvis** 2002 (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Should not the cost of cleaning up our waterways be met by the profits of water companies, not higher bills paid for by hard-pressed consumers?

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that dividends and profits of water companies cannot come from customers—[*Interruption.*] If the water companies want to compensate people and they have not done the right thing by the environment, that will not come out of customers' pockets. This Government have put in a huge plan for £56 billion-worth of investment by the water companies to clean up our waters—this is more than ever before.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Dog-loving constituents of mine have expressed concerns about a potential ban on e-collars. They say that in Wales, where e-collars are banned, attacks on sheep have increased exponentially, with the result being electric fences that are far more harmful to dogs. Will my right hon. Friend consider some form of licensing or regulation of usage, rather than an outright ban?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):** I have heard clearly what my right hon. Friend is saying. I, too, am a dog lover and understand the need for not only positive training, but corrective training at times. For that reason, the use of collars that emit a spray or vibration will be permitted to continue, and invisible fence containment systems are also not part of this proposal. I will ensure that she has a meeting with my counterpart in the other place, because this is yet to be debated in the Lords.

T5. [905138] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): The proposed accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership has required concessions to Malaysia on palm oil tariffs, raising concerns about the environment and increased deforestation. What involvement have Ministers from the Department had in the negotiations? Will the Government ensure that there are at least back letters to protect the social and environmental necessity of avoiding deforestation?

**Dr Coffey:** Of course, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was heavily involved in this wide-ranging trade deal, which covered not just agricultural elements, but a number of services. Our FLEGT—forest law enforcement governance and trade—regulations, which we are still processing, will be an effective way of making sure that the supply chain is sustainable for any products brought into the country that it covers.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Although showing some progress, the NFU's latest digital technology survey reveals that only 21% reported reliable mobile signal throughout their farms and fewer than half have adequate broadband for their business. What is my right hon. Friend doing with her counterparts in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensure that rural businesses are prioritised for increased connectivity.

**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: of course we need good broadband and good connectivity across rural areas. We continue to have conversations with our friends in the Department to make sure that this is delivered, as it is a priority of the Government.

T7. [905140] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Those of us who represent fishing communities hear every week of boats that have had to tie up as a consequence of their inability to get crew, because of the Home Office's refusal to give a bespoke visa scheme for getting crew. We all hear it. Can the Minister assure me that his Department is actually counting the number of these boats, and can he tell the House what it stands at today?

**Mark Spencer:** The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have been able to get fishermen on to the shortage occupation list. The Home Office has conceded on that so that those people can now make use of that process. We shall continue to have conversations with both the fishing industry and the Home Office to try to help the industry. The good news is that, following our leaving the EU, we do now have the opportunity to manage our own fisheries and we have been able to increase quotas, and the amount of catch and fish that is landed has now gone up.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): This week, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee visited a Dogs Trust rescue centre as part of our inquiry on pet welfare and abuse. Each year, huge numbers of puppies, heavily pregnant dogs and dogs that have had their ears horrifically cropped are smuggled into the UK. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me and the House that the Government are committed to stamping out these horrific practices by bringing back the appropriate animal welfare legislation?

**Dr Coffey:** Yes, I can.

T8. [905141] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My constituents expect the Government to tackle the sale of, and trade in, animal fur. The consultation of the Government's Fur Market in Great Britain was launched in May 2021. Although that is more than two years ago, we are still waiting for a formal response from Ministers. Why has it taken so long?

**Dr Coffey:** I have already set out to the House that it is two years since the ambitious animal welfare plan was put in place. We have pursued a number of different issues. As you can imagine, Mr Speaker, the Government are working on a variety of things and a response will be given in due course.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): On Monday, BBC's "Panorama" programme examined the continuing misery being inflicted on my constituents by Walleys Quarry Landfill, and, as you will know, Mr Speaker, the Staffordshire waste site in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is also affecting my constituents. We have a situation where not one, but two rogue operators are making the lives of the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme a misery, and the actions of the Environment Agency are too slow and not robust enough, so what will the Minister do to ensure that we get justice and accountability for what we are going through?

**Rebecca Pow:** I know that my hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on the issue of Walleys Quarry, and that the Secretary of State has visited the area recently. I know, too, that there was a "Panorama" programme about the site. An enforcement notice was issued by the EA on 5 May requiring the operator to take further action around waste acceptance procedures on the site to reduce the risk of sulphate-bearing material entering the landfill. I have spoken many times to the EA and know that it is working very hard to reduce the dangers, potentially, that locals may feel come from this site.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Will the Minister be prepared to meet me and representatives of the Horticulture Trades Association to discuss what further steps the Government could take to support the horticultural sector in developing responsibly resourced, high-quality alternatives to peat that can be produced at volume?

**Trudy Harrison:** I have already met James Barnes at the HTA and I will continue to meet him and other members of the association. I have visited a number of nurseries and will continue to do so. I also offer to have a meeting with the hon. Member to discuss how we are supporting the horticultural industry, which is incredibly important in this country for food production. During the week of the Chelsea Flower Show we can see for ourselves the green-fingered talents of this country, which need to continue and be supported.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*

### Serious Violent Crime Prosecutions

1. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support the prosecution of serious violent crime. [905104]

11. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support the prosecution of serious violent crime. [905115]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** This Government are committed to delivering justice for victims of serious violence, and I can confirm that the

CPS prosecuted more than 103,000 cases of serious violence, firearm offences and homicides in 2022, with a conviction rate of over 84%.

**Scott Benton:** There have been a number of knife crime incidents in Blackpool over recent weeks that have concerned my constituents, not least a disturbing case in which a man was arrested after carrying a 16-inch machete. What action is being taken by the CPS to reduce knife crime offending both in Blackpool and across Lancashire as a whole?

**The Solicitor General:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his interest and knowledge in this area—not least because he seems to be drawn for these questions, week in, week out. Of course the CPS has been instrumental in the pilots of serious violence reduction orders, which are aimed at reducing knife crime, and it is right to say that those orders will provide an extra tool to help to crack down on violent crime. The CPS looks at both breaches of those and the original orders. The law tour next week is visiting the north-west CPS area, which covers both my hon. Friend's constituency and yours, Mr Speaker, and you would both be more than welcome to join us on that tour to see the CPS and the police working together on this issue.

**Ian Levy:** My constituents and I have been deeply shaken by recent incidents of violent crime in my constituency. Losing a loved one to senseless violence is a tragedy that no one should ever have to endure. Will my hon. and learned Friend meet me to discuss these cases, which have caused concern to my constituents, and how we can better support victims and their families by ensuring that the prosecution of violent crime is a priority?

**The Solicitor General:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his hard work on behalf of his constituents. It is right to say that tackling serious violence and improving the support we offer to victims is a priority for this Government. That is shown not least through the Victims and Prisoners Bill and the revised victims code. I would be happy to meet him to discuss that further.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Solicitor General very much for his responses to those questions. Northern Ireland has seen more than its share of violent crime, but in relation to the knife crime that both questions referred to, Northern Ireland has also seen an increase in the number of knife murders, attempted murders and people carrying knives or other sharp instruments. I know he is a very dutiful Minister, so what opportunity has he had to discuss those matters with the pertinent Minister for Northern Ireland, to ensure that we also see some benefit from those measures?

**The Solicitor General:** May I return the hon. Gentleman's compliment and pay tribute to him for his diligence in this House and for all that he does? In fact, the Attorney General has had very close links with Northern Ireland recently, and both she and I, with the Advocate General for Scotland, had the privilege of being called to the Bar in Northern Ireland. I am determined to keep those conversations and channels open, and the hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Office is consulting now on knife crime, with a closing date of 6 June.

## Violence against Women and Girls

**2. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase the proportion of cases relating to violence against women and girls that are prosecuted. [905105]

**5. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase the proportion of cases relating to violence against women and girls that are prosecuted. [905109]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** Tackling violence against women and girls remains one of the Government's top priorities. We are doing everything possible to make our streets and homes safer for women and girls. Since the launch of the joint action plan, we have seen a significant increase in charge volumes for adult rape since January 2021.

**Dr Huq:** More than one in nine rape prosecutions were dropped last year because victims withdrew their support, crushed by what can be a three-year wait for their day in court and the humiliation of victim blaming. Will the Attorney General fix those problems and accept the joint inspectorate's conclusions that the system is obviously failing rape victims when many of them find the legal process overlong and more harrowing than the original offence?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for her interest in this matter; it is something she and I discussed for many years as colleagues on the Justice Committee. We know it is important that justice is given as speedily as possible. Digging into the attrition of victims, particularly in rape cases, is very salutary. It is one reason why the Government have increased the money available to support victims fourfold in recent times. On the law tour next week, which the Solicitor General referred to, we will be visiting an independent sexual violence adviser in Nottingham. We know that, where a victim has support, they are 50% less likely to withdraw from proceedings.

**Ruth Cadbury:** I have heard from many women in my constituency who have been victims of domestic violence and abuse. They have reported it to the police but they are still not getting the support or the justice that they deserve. Rather than offering warm words, can the Attorney General explain why the number of charges for domestic abuse and violence has not just failed to keep pace with the rise in reported offences but has gone so dramatically backwards?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for her interest in this matter as well. Far more than warm words are being provided by the Government. We have been working very closely on real joint work between the CPS and the police. We know that that has significantly increased the number of successful prosecutions in rape and serious sexual offence cases. We are now rolling out a similar but not identical form of working in domestic abuse cases. She will be pleased to know that, in her CPS area, the volume of adult rape suspects charged has gone up 41% in the last year.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that it is important to remember that, where there is sufficient evidence to put a case before a jury, the conviction rate for rape and serious sexual offences is entirely consistent and on a par with that for other serious violent offences? Is not the real challenge to ensure that the quality of the evidence presented by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service is sufficient to bring charges in the first place? That was the issue highlighted in the joint inspection report. Is not that where we should be paying the most attention?

**The Attorney General:** Well, this is a Justice Committee alumni session and it is always good to hear from our Chair. He makes, as we would all expect, an important point. It is true that the CPS can prosecute only the cases that are referred to it. It then works out which ones to prosecute using a two-stage legal test. If we strip out the guilty pleas, the CPS is running at a conviction rate of between 50% and 60%. It always prosecutes where there is sufficient evidence and it is in the public interest to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Attorney General.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Attorney General has been discussing rape prosecution statistics. National World reported last month that there have been 1,600 cases over the past five years in which a suspect accused of and investigated for rape ended up being charged with a lesser offence. We all know that that type of under-charging is not uncommon, but the allegation in National World was that those 1,600 cases were then counted towards the charge rate for rape, even though no one had been charged with a rape offence. Can the Attorney General tell us whether that is true and, if so, does it mean that the charge rate for rape is even lower than we currently think?

**The Attorney General:** I, too, saw that report, and I asked for further clarification of the material within it. I have been told that, for a force to have charged an alternative offence, the facts and the evidence must be extremely similar and must relate to the victim and the circumstances. I have also been told—although I have not dug into every single one of those cases—that some of the reporting that the right hon. Lady refers to may relate to historic sexual abuse and that may explain some of the figures.

### Illegal Migration Bill: Trafficking Convention

3. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Whether she has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Illegal Migration Bill with the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings. [905107]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** By long-standing convention, whether the Law Officers have been asked to provide advice, and the contents of any such advice, is not disclosed outside Government.

**Drew Hendry:** Nearly 200 civil society organisations covering human trafficking, modern slavery, asylum and refugees have called on the Government to immediately

withdraw the Illegal Migration Bill because, as it stands, it will breach multiple conventions and agreements in international law. Will the Attorney General work with her colleagues to revise, review and change these provisions, or is she happy to underline that hers is a lawbreaking Government?

**The Attorney General:** As I said, there is a long-standing convention that means I cannot go into the legal advice that may or may not have been given. I can say simply that we do consider the Bill to be consistent with our international obligations.

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

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Attorney General will know that concern has been expressed on both sides of the House that the Bill will make it even harder to successfully prosecute traffickers. In short, that is because victims will not come forward if it simply means they are going to be detained and then removed to Rwanda. What is the Attorney General going to do about that?

**The Attorney General:** I am sorry, but once again, I cannot go into the content of any legal advice that might have been given. I would, however, refer the hon. Gentleman to the explanatory notes that accompany the Illegal Migration Bill, which set out the circumstances in which ECAT is operating at the moment.

### Serious Fraud Office

4. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Whether she plans to reform the Serious Fraud Office. [905108]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** The SFO has implemented wide-ranging reforms following the recommendations made by Sir David Calvert-Smith and Brian Altman KC. The SFO's strategic plan sets out a programme to modernise, build on capabilities and protect the UK's reputation as a safe place to do business.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Just how much detail will the Solicitor General require to properly implement Sir David's recommendation on oversight? We need to keep a tight rein on the remaining tenure of the current director, do we not?

**The Solicitor General:** As ever, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. I am sure he will have seen the written ministerial statement that was laid before the House yesterday. The update confirmed that the planned review is ongoing. Additionally, since April this year, case lists prepared for superintendents' meetings include all cases that may have required case consent and, importantly, there is more explicit signposting to high-risk cases.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Could we talk about the fraud strategy, which, sadly, is itself a bit of a fraud? As revealed by Spotlight on Corruption, the new national fraud squad is patched together with £100 million

already announced last year and 400 officers, up to 300 of whom are already in post. With no new money and precious few new staff, how on earth will that make a dent in the £6.8 billion a year lost to consumer fraud, let alone the £21 billion a year in public sector fraud that this Government let run rife?

**The Solicitor General:** I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not welcome the strategy. He was calling for it, and the shadow Attorney General, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), was calling for it at the last Attorney General questions. We promised that it would be delivered soon—I remember that exchange—and, indeed, it was delivered soon after those questions. He will know that that strategy sits within the Home Office, which is absolutely right, and I will continue to work with the Home Office on the fraud strategy. I am sure he will be pleased, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was, with the written ministerial statement yesterday specifically on the subject of this Question.

### Domestic Abuse Prosecutions

6. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support the prosecution of domestic abuse cases. [905110]

8. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support the prosecution of domestic abuse cases. [905112]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** We are committed to increasing the volume of prosecutions and supporting more victims of domestic abuse. For example, we have ensured that victims now have much longer to report offences.

**Selaine Saxby:** Can my right hon. and learned Friend outline what is being done to encourage the reporting of rape and sexual assault in rural areas, where victims may be less likely to report these crimes due to distant support services?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for her rural area. She will be pleased to know that, in the south-west England CPS area, we consistently see one of the highest conviction rates for rape and domestic abuse. Her area is covered by Operation Soteria, which is testing new ways of working between the police and the CPS.

**Bob Blackman:** The breakdown of a relationship is a particular stigma for women in families from the Indian subcontinent, many of whom are forced to either remain in coercive relationships or return to their abuser. What measures could my right hon. and learned Friend take to ensure that those women are given full support through the Crown Prosecution Service and assisted to rebuild their lives?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend is a great campaigner for Harrow East and all the communities that live there. He will be pleased to know that CPS London is also working hard: this week, it is holding an event in his constituency to develop the domestic abuse

joint justice plan, where colleagues from across the criminal justice system will come together to increase prosecutions in the cases he has outlined.

### Financial Services Sector: Corruption

7. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): What steps she is taking to ensure the effective prosecution of corruption in the financial services sector. [905111]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill will extend the Serious Fraud Office's pre-investigative powers, allowing it to compel people to furnish the SFO with information earlier in cases of domestic corruption and fraud.

**Andrew Bridgen:** I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his answer. Will he agree to meet me and a number of whistleblowers at his earliest convenience? We will provide him with evidence of corruption and fraud in financial institutions, financial regulators and the judiciary.

**The Solicitor General:** The Financial Conduct Authority rightly published guidelines in July 2017 referring back to the money laundering regulations of that year. The hon. Gentleman might want to direct his inquiries towards the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. In relation to his substantive question about prosecutions, it is of course right that both the SFO and the CPS operate independently. The Attorney General is responsible for safeguarding that independence, and she takes that role incredibly seriously.

### Serious Fraud Office Reviews

9. **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What progress the Government has made on the implementation of the recommendations of the reviews of the Serious Fraud Office by Sir David Calvert-Smith and Brian Altman KC. [905113]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** Yesterday, the Attorney General laid before the House a written ministerial statement outlining the progress made on the delivery of the recommendations made by Sir David, which demonstrated significant progress in implementing all 29 recommendations.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** The husband of a constituent of mine was a powerful and strong professional footballer, and was defrauded of all his life's savings and investments in a huge, organised, fraudulent scam. Since then, in spite of his losses and being the victim, he and many of his colleagues have been pushed to absolute bankruptcy by further claims from other Government Departments for consequential taxes and so on, on already fraudulent activities. What more can my hon. and learned Friend do to make sure that Government Departments do not further punish those victims?

**The Solicitor General:** I am very grateful indeed to my right hon. Friend for raising this case; she is right to do so, and I know that the Attorney General is familiar with the details of the case. I will just note one thing that may be of relevance and help my right hon. Friend: the CPS has recovered assets worth £480 million through confiscation orders, of which £105 million has been returned to victims of crime by way of compensation.

### Lord Chancellor and Law Officers

10. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the ninth report of the House of Lords Constitution Committee, “The roles of the Lord Chancellor and the Law Officers”, HL 118, published on 18 January 2023.

[905114]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** As Attorney General, I am honoured to play an important role in upholding the rule of law, which is fundamental to our constitution. I thank the House of Lords Constitution Committee for its report. The Government published their response in March, and I am looking forward to appearing before the Committee next month.

**Jeff Smith:** The Constitution Committee said:

“The Government has now twice knowingly introduced legislation...which would breach the UK’s international obligations and in doing so, undermined the rule of law.”

The Committee was referring to the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. Does this Attorney General accept that the Illegal Migration Bill is the third such example, and the first on her watch?

**The Attorney General:** No, I do not accept that. I am bound by the Law Officers’ convention mentioned earlier, so I cannot comment on advice, even that provided by previous Law Officers. With regard to the two earlier Bills that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the Government published summaries of their legal position during the introduction of both Bills, and we did so more recently in February this year on the Windsor framework.

## Net Migration Figures

10.34 am

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on net migration figures.

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick)**: Net migration to the United Kingdom is far too high. That was already clear from the previous set of official data. The Office for National Statistics has today amended its previous published estimate of net migration for the year ending June 2022 to 606,000. The statistics published today indicate that net migration has flatlined since then. In the year ending December 2022, it estimates that net migration remained at 606,000. These particularly high figures are in large part due to temporary and exceptional factors, such as the UK's Ukraine and Hong Kong British nationals overseas schemes. Last year, more than 200,000 Ukrainians and 150,000 Hong Kong British nationals overseas made use of the routes to life or time in the United Kingdom. Those schemes command broad support from the British public, and we were right to introduce them.

The Government remain committed to reducing overall net migration to sustainable levels. That is a solemn promise that we made to the British public in our manifesto, and we are unwavering in our determination to deliver it. This week, we announced steps to tackle the substantial rise in the number of student dependants coming to the UK. The package of measures will ensure that we can reduce migration while continuing to benefit from the skills and resources our economy needs, because universities should be in the education business, not the immigration business. We expect this package to have a tangible impact on net migration. Taken together with the easing of temporary factors, such as our exceptional humanitarian offers, we expect net migration to fall to pre-pandemic levels in the medium term.

The public rightly expect us to control our borders, whether that is stopping the boats and addressing illegal migration or ensuring that levels of legal migration do not place undue pressure on public services, housing supply or integration. The Government are taking decisive action on both counts. Under the points-based system that we introduced post Brexit, we can control immigration, we must control immigration, and we will.

**Yvette Cooper**: Today's extraordinary figures, including the doubling of the number of work visas since the pandemic, show that the Conservatives have no plan and no grip on immigration. They show the chaos in this Government. Work visas are up 119% since before the pandemic. The Conservatives have totally failed to tackle endemic skills shortages and get people back to work. Net migration is more than twice the level that Ministers were aiming for and considerably more than the Home Secretary's claimed aims. The asylum backlog is at a record high—the opposite of the Prime Minister's promise to clear the backlog this year. Less than 1% of last year's small boat arrivals have had a decision. Where is the Home Secretary, who is in charge of these policies? She has gone to ground. There are reports that she is not even going to do media. She has not come to

this House. She is in internal meetings—presumably, more private courses arranged by civil servants. What is the point of her?

Net migration should come down and we would expect it to do so, but the continued gap between the Government's rhetoric and the reality is very damaging. Rightly, the UK has given support to Ukraine and to Hongkongers. Rightly, we welcome international students who bring substantial benefits, but changes on family are sensible. International recruitment will always be important so that we get the skills and talent we need, but we have a major increase in employers turning to overseas recruitment, and the Government have no plan to increase training or to properly tackle those skills shortages here at home.

On health and social care, one of the biggest areas, why will the Minister not agree to Labour's plan to increase the training for nurses and doctors in the UK, paid for by getting rid of the non-doms exemption? Will he ditch the unfair 20% wage discount that means that shortage occupations can undercut and pay below the going rate, making it even harder to get the training, skills and fair recruitment we need? Everyone should be paid the going rate.

There has been no action at all to address the huge backlog in the asylum system and to make sure that claims are properly processed. Immigration is important to this country, and we need a system that works, but it has to be properly controlled and managed, rather than the chaos that the Government have created.

**Robert Jenrick**: The Labour party feigns interest in cutting net migration, but I can assure the right hon. Lady that nobody is buying it. Last week, the chair of the Labour party, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), said that under Labour net migration would go up in the short term. The leader of the Labour party stood on a campaign pledge to defend freedom of movement if the UK remained outside the EU. He has said that there is a

"racist undercurrent which permeates all immigration law".

Does the shadow Home Secretary agree with that?

At every possible opportunity, Labour Members have voted against every measure this Government have brought forward to control migration. They voted against ending free movement and, at every turn, they voted against measures to tackle illegal migration. Just recently, they voted against the Illegal Migration Bill. The truth is that the Labour party has no interest in controlled and orderly migration. The Conservative party is taking tangible steps to bring down net migration. Yesterday, we took a decisive step to clamp down on student dependants, because universities should be selling education, not immigration. Belatedly, the shadow Home Secretary says she agrees with that. The Conservative party made a solemn promise to the British public to reduce net migration. Thanks to Brexit, we now have the tools at our disposal to do that. We can and we must deliver.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry that, while my right hon. Friend was replying to those questions, four of the Labour Front Benchers were talking at the same time. I think that was to disguise the

fact that their spokesperson appeared to agree with virtually every sensible element of the Government's immigration control policy.

Does my right hon. Friend agree with me about this? Beyond the admission order office, there is the memorial plaque for the Kindertransport. Some of those who feel most strongly against immigration now feel proud of what we did then. We have to remember that there were then and there are now tens of millions of people around the world suffering because of violence in their own countries, and there are others with bad Governments who stop them having economic success where they are. Can I say that, as well as having a good immigration policy, we ought to do all we can around the world to have better governance and a flexible economic system, so that people can be happy living where they are, not feeling that they have to come here for refuge?

**Robert Jenrick:** I strongly agree with the Father of the House. We have made two very significant interventions in the last two years. The first was to provide sanctuary here in the United Kingdom for Hong Kong BNOs, to whom we have a moral and historical obligation, to enable them to escape creeping authoritarianism in Hong Kong and make a new life here in the UK. We are proud of that, and I expect that, in the years to come, that scheme will be looked back on as a great success for this country. Secondly, the Ukraine schemes have now led to 200,000 Ukrainians coming to the UK and seeking sanctuary here, with hundreds of thousands of British people opening up their homes to support them. Those were great schemes.

We want to ensure schemes such as those can continue, and that the UK can be an even greater force for good in the world. That does not mean, however, that we should go slow on further measures to bring down net migration, because net migration does place very significant burdens on communities in respect of housing, public services and our ability to integrate people. That is why we made further interventions this week, and we will consider further ones in the future.

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

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Can I start by recognising the amazing contribution of all those who have come to make the UK their home, whether they are refugees or students, care workers, nurses, hospitality workers or anything else? We on the SNP Benches say thank you. Of course, it was right to welcome Ukrainians and BNOs from Hong Kong in 2022, and we welcome that as well. I really hope that British politics will not descend back into a horrible competition about who is going to be toughest on immigration.

Ministers often give us a nice soundbite about how they want a migration system that works for the whole of the UK. We say that is fine, but it does not mean that precisely the same policies need to apply everywhere. In Scotland, we have no need or desire for policies that are going to put international students off, keep families apart or make it harder to recruit the workers we need. Does the Minister have anything to say about the unique challenges faced by different parts of the UK and how those shape immigration policy? Will he even look again at the remote areas pilot scheme, which was recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee, and sought and voted for by the Scottish Parliament?

**Robert Jenrick:** I was not expecting a question today arguing that net migration was too low—that seems to be the position of the SNP—but the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point; we need a pragmatic approach to particular sectors that are facing skills shortages, and we need to think about regional disparities across the whole United Kingdom. We do not believe that there should be separate immigration systems for the nations of the UK, and the evidence bears that out: there is no material difference in either unemployment or economic inactivity between Scotland and the United Kingdom average. We do take account, through the shortage occupation list, of particular sectors that are facing challenges, and some are of course more focused in some parts of the UK than in others. Earlier in the week, for example, we decided to add further fishing occupations to the shortage occupation list in order to support the offshore fishing industry, which I hope will be supported by the hon. Gentleman and fellow Scottish MPs who have connections with the industry.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Some people in the Treasury seem to think that a good way to grow the economy is to fill the country with ever more people, but that is bad for productivity and bad for British workers, who are being undercut by mass migration from all over the world. Why is it that under the points-based system we allow into the country people earning only £26,000 a year, while the median UK salary is £33,000? Is not an obvious solution to insist that everybody who comes in is skilled and earns the median UK salary, as then we can boost productivity and get British people back to work?

**Robert Jenrick:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point, which he has made in the past and with which I have a lot of sympathy. We both believe that we need a controlled migration system and that net migration has a number of impacts on communities, including further pressure on public services and housing supply and making it more difficult to integrate people into our country and maintain community cohesion. In some instances, high levels of net migration also put downward pressure on wages for the domestic economy and enable some employers to reach for the easy lever of importing foreign labour rather than training up their own British workforce. It is for those reasons what we created the points-based system that has a salary threshold—a freedom we only have as a result of leaving the European Union—and if further changes to that system are necessary in the future, we will make them.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): Local residents in my constituency are rightly shocked and concerned to hear that the Minister's Department is planning to house 300 asylum seekers in the Stradey Park hotel, a totally disproportionate number for the village of Furnace and local services. Will the Minister meet me to hear about local concerns, and what is he doing to prevent the need to commandeer the Stradey Park hotel and to clear the Home Office backlog of 160,000 undetermined claims so that those from safe countries can be returned and those who are genuine refugees can move out of hotels and be integrated in small numbers into suitable communities?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am delighted to hear that the Government have just chalked up another vote for the Illegal Migration Bill, because Members cannot say

[Robert Jenrick]

they want open borders, with unlimited numbers of individuals coming into this country, whether legally or illegally, but they do not want them in their own constituency—it is an inconsistent approach. If the hon. Lady feels so strongly and is getting such strong representations from her constituents, she should support the Government's efforts to clamp down on illegal migration.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): When they take effect, what estimate has the Minister got for the impact of the measures that the Government announced yesterday?

**Robert Jenrick:** We believe that the measures we announced yesterday with regard to student dependants will have a tangible effect on the number of student dependants coming into the country, which, as the figures published by the Office for National Statistics show, is currently very considerable. It is not right that universities are in some cases in the immigration business rather than the teaching and education one. We are clamping down on those practices and that will help us bring down net migration in the medium term. But let me be abundantly clear to my right hon. Friend: net migration is far too high and we need to take measures to bring it down. We are not complacent; we want to make good on our promise to the British public.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Immigration Minister seems to be making a very good case for increased wage inflation. I wonder what his Treasury colleagues make of the overall impact of that on the economy. Sector after sector, whether agriculture, hospitality, fishing or care services, tell us that they all need access to more skilled staff, and they simply do not have that access at the moment. He stands at the Dispatch Box and talks about adding fishing to the shortage occupation list, but he completely ignores the fact that his and the Home Secretary's refusal to lower the standard of English language skills required renders that absolutely meaningless for the fishing industry and, as a result of his decision, fishing boats in my constituency and right around the coast are tied up today. When will he start listening to business? When did the Conservative party stop doing that?

**Robert Jenrick:** The case I was making was that we sustainably increase productivity by encouraging our employers to invest in their workforce and in technology, rather than simply by reaching for the easy lever of further international labour. With respect to the fishing sector, this measure that we have made this week has been broadly welcomed by the fishing sector. I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. Gentleman if his contention is that we should allow people who cannot speak or write in English into the United Kingdom on visas that have a route to settlement. That is wrong. The standard of English that we maintain is a low standard, and we need it for health and safety at the workplace, to prevent exploitation and to ensure that people can integrate into our communities. That is absolutely the right approach.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): People who come to this country and want to work here and add value are welcome. Clearly the concern is the illegal migration figures, which have continued to grow. Given

that the net migration figures have almost flatlined, will my right hon. Friend lay out what has happened over that period of time and what his plans are for the future to ensure that the total comes down?

**Robert Jenrick:** The ONS has changed its methodology and increased the estimate it made in the middle of last year, to say that net migration was 606,000 at that point, when it previously published its data, and it sees no evidence that it has increased since then, which suggests that numbers are now flatlining. There are reasons to believe that the number of individuals coming on our humanitarian schemes from Hong Kong and Ukraine will reduce over the course of the year, although it is difficult to predict that with certainty, particularly with respect to Ukraine. The measures that we have taken this week with respect to student dependants will have a material impact, so it is reasonable to assume that numbers will now be on a downward trajectory. But I do not want to give any impression of complacency, because there is clearly a great deal more to be done. If we need to make further interventions, we will.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Government have clearly lost control of all aspects of immigration and migration. Labour voted against the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Bill because we said that they would not work, and the figures show that they have not worked. Will the Minister explain why fewer than 1% of the people who arrived on small boats last year have had their asylum claims determined, and why the figure is so low?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Gentleman and his party have voted against every measure that the Government have brought forward to control migration, whether legal or illegal migration, so his contention that Labour would get control of migration is laughable. It is important that we bring the backlog of cases down. That is why the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I have set out a clear plan to do that. We see the dividends of that, and we expect the legacy backlog to be cleared over the course of the year, as we promised. It is not correct, however, to suggest that if illegal migrants' claims are processed faster, that will reduce the number of people coming into the country. In all likelihood, that would lead to an increase.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The anger and frustration of my constituents has been focused on illegal migration up until now, but that anger and frustration will grow when they consider these legal migration figures. We are creating, roughly speaking, eight new parliamentary constituencies with this number. If that continues, it is clearly unsustainable. The Minister spoke about medium-term plans to reduce the numbers, but what my constituents want to know is what short-term plans there are. Other than those that have been announced recently, what else is the Department considering?

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend makes a number of important points. I think few Members of this House have argued more consistently than I have that we need to build more homes and that there needs to be a proper join-up between the numbers coming in and the way we accommodate them. There are, I am afraid, intolerable pressures placed on the country's public services and

housing supply by sustained very high levels of net migration. That is one of the reasons why we need to take action. We announced a package of measures this week, which includes changes to the rules with respect to student dependants and increased enforcement activity to clamp down on egregious abuse of the system by education agents. As I said in answer to earlier questions, if we need to make more changes, we will do so.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): There is a huge gap between the Government's rhetoric and reality. The Minister just said that the net migration figure would return to pre-pandemic levels in the medium term, so can he please say what his assessment is for the net migration figure for the year ahead?

**Robert Jenrick:** As I said in answer to earlier questions, we expect numbers to reduce. We are taking further steps this week, which we think will make a material difference. If we need to do more, we will, because net migration is far too high. I hope the hon. Gentleman, by his question, agrees with me in that regard, and that he will support the measures we take to bring numbers down.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): If it were possible for everyone who crosses the channel illegally in a small boat to be returned to France, that would be not only in our interests but in the interests of France, because we would stop people buffering on its north-east coast to try to get into this country. I know it is very difficult, but what are the chances that that could happen, because it would solve the problem?

**Robert Jenrick:** We are making considerable efforts to deepen our relationship with the French Government. In fact, next week I will be in Paris to meet our counterparts in the French Interior Ministry. The Prime Minister achieved, in short succession, two significant deals that are leading to an increase in activity on the beaches, increased joint working on counter-organised immigration crime, and a new joint working centre in Lille that I will be visiting shortly. If there was a possibility of a readmissions agreement with France, that is certainly something the Government would welcome and we have made that clear. In our conversations with both President Macron and the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, we offered a range of solutions that could lead to that.

I would just say, however, that the previous readmissions agreement—Dublin—which operated during our time in the European Union, was not successful. In the last years of its operation, more people were being brought from France to the United Kingdom than were sent from the UK to France, so this is not a panacea. But if there are ways in which we can take this forward, we will.

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Tories on the Government Benches and the Tory-lite Labour party would have the public believe that a rise in net migration is something to fear. That could not be further from the truth. Immigrants across all four nations make a contribution to society, politically, economically and socially, from running small local businesses in our high streets to developing groundbreaking technology and working in the NHS—they are integral to society.

In my maiden speech, I called for immigration to be devolved. Scotland wants immigration and our needs are different. Does the Minister agree that now is the time for immigration to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not agree with the hon. Lady. As I have already said in answer to other questions, there is a limit to the number of individuals who can come into any country, regardless of the benefits they might bring, because we have finite resources, for example in housing and access to public services. Independent advisers, including the Migration Advisory Committee, have said that there is a range of reasons why in some cases migrants choose to come to other parts of the UK over Scotland. There is a role for the Scottish Government in tackling those issues.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Unsustainable levels of migration continue to have a significant impact on housing in the south-east. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must do all we can to reach sustainable levels of migration? On illegal migration and processing of asylum claims, we must ensure that the Home Office cracks down on the people smugglers while ensuring that the likes of Scotland take its fair share of people, rather than continuing to turn up here and virtue signal.

**Robert Jenrick:** I strongly agree. It is critical that we take action to bring down net migration. My hon. Friend represents a community where there is intense pressure on housing, and it is a struggle for many young people and those on lower incomes to get on the housing ladder. We must be cognisant of that when setting our migration policies. He is right on the SNP; it is a party of humanitarian nimbys. Its Members come here and preach, but their words are always greater than their actions.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Somewhat unusually, this morning we seem to have learned something new from the Dispatch Box: the Home Office's inability to process applications, resulting in many people living in hotels across the country—including in Bristol—means that the holding pattern will remain for some time. In fact, that may be a deliberate policy, as the Minister said that if they were processed, there would be more. That is what he said—he can clarify. How long are people expected to live in hotels in cities across the country? What support is being given to local authorities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) just asked, and what is the Government's ultimate plan for these people?

**Robert Jenrick:** I did not say that. The hon. Lady should check the record after this urgent question. I said that the Labour party's approach, as I understand it, is to let more people in and to process their claims faster. I gently pointed out that that is very unlikely to result in fewer illegal migrants crossing the channel. We need to suffuse our entire system with deterrence. That is why we are bringing forward new sites, such as the large sites and barges, and the Illegal Migration Bill. We want to clear the backlog, but above all we want to stop people coming in the first place. The sustainable answer to that is to break the business model of the people smugglers and back the Illegal Migration Bill.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Today's figures are too high, and my constituents will expect to see them fall. I welcome what the Office for National Statistics has said about them flatlining, and I welcome, again, what my right hon. Friend announced yesterday about student dependant visas, which will help them to fall. Does he agree that my constituency will not buy the line from the shadow Home Secretary, because the Opposition is led by an arch remainer who favours freedom of movement, and it has voted against every single measure that we have brought to control legal and illegal migration, including our Bill to stop the boats?

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend is right. Nobody believes the position of the Labour party because time and again, when it is offered the opportunity to vote for legislation to tighten control of migration, whether legal or illegal, it always votes against it. We all know that our borders would be open under a future Labour Government. That is why we need to take the steps that we have, and why his constituents should continue to back him and the Conservative party.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): The number of people waiting for asylum applications to be processed for more than six months has risen by 10,000 to 128,000. The Minister suggested that reducing the backlog, which is a Government objective, will not make any difference. Can he tell us whether he does want to reduce it, whether he thinks it will not make any difference and on what basis he is making that assessment?

**Robert Jenrick:** I have been clear that we want to reduce the backlog, as part of our 10-point plan to tackle illegal migration. We have put in place a series of measures to reduce bureaucracy, to streamline the process and to double the number of asylum decision makers. Those investments are already paying dividends. We are confident that the legacy backlog will be cleared over the course of the year.

The point I was making, which I am happy to reiterate, is that the faster the process, the more pull factor there is to the United Kingdom. That is not a reason to maintain an inefficient process, but we need a process where deterrence is suffused through every element, else we will never break the business model of the people smugglers.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My old home state of Western Australia has just announced even further investment in additional support for international students, saying:

"It is important we provide international students...with a safe and welcoming environment for them to flourish in".

Education is a global market, so can the Minister explain why it is a good thing that international students simply take their money, skills and enthusiasm elsewhere, deterred by this crackdown on their families and the support they offer, rather than choose the UK, where life for them is made ever more difficult?

**Robert Jenrick:** I presume the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that the Government have met their target of 600,000 international students coming to the UK every year—as set by our international education strategy—10 years early. Last year, 605,000 international students came, and I suspect the number this year will be higher

still. There is absolutely no sense that the Government are reneging on those commitments or creating an environment that is unwelcoming to international students. We want universities to focus on teaching, and not inadvertently create a backdoor to immigration status here in the UK. That is why we have made the changes we have made this week, which have been broadly welcomed by both the public and the sector.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The Office for National Statistics has this morning published the record net migration figure of 606,000, including 114,000 long-term arrivals from Ukraine and 52,000 from Hong Kong, so well below 170,000 in total. We all remember a previous Conservative Prime Minister falsely promising the British people that he would bring net migration down to the tens of thousands, and the last-but-one Prime Minister promising that he would bring net migration figures to below 250,000, although he also failed miserably. I will not mention the previous Prime Minister, because she did not even last two months before crashing the economy. The last Conservative party manifesto pledged that

"overall numbers will come down".

How is that going? What went wrong?

**Robert Jenrick:** We would not have the tools to tackle net migration had we taken the hon. Gentleman's advice and remained within the European Union. It is only as a result of our new freedoms that we can control our immigration system. He has voted against every possible opportunity to tackle either legal or illegal migration, so on this argument he has no foot to stand on.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In reviewing the net migration numbers, has the Minister had time to review the number of missing unaccompanied migrant children in the United Kingdom? The figure last week stood at over 200. If he has not had time to review that, will he come back to the House to tell us how many of those missing children have been found and what his Government are doing to make sure the situation never happens again?

**Robert Jenrick:** I have looked into the issue in great detail. I have spent time with officials from the Home Office and local authorities where we have hotels for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, speaking privately to the social workers and support staff who care for them, to ensure that we have the right processes in place. I am confident that we do. The hotels have a range of very considerable support around them. When a young person goes missing from a hotel, all the same processes are followed as for any other missing person, whether that be a child of a migrant or our own children.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Secretary of State raised very important questions about work visas that the Minister has not yet addressed. The number of work visas has doubled since the pandemic. Are the Government satisfied with that increase?

**Robert Jenrick:** We want a system that enables businesses to bring in foreign workers where there are sustained skills shortages, but we want British employers to focus, in the first instance, on training British workers to fill

those vacancies, because there are large numbers of people who are economically inactive. The first duty of employers and the Government is to help those people back into the workforce.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Immigrants make an invaluable contribution to our economy and enrich our communities. International students, in particular, are needed and valued, especially in this post-Brexit labour shortage era. The reactionary and hostile plans that this Government are determined to put in place, as well as the Minister's tone in the Chamber today, speak clearly of a desire to impede our ability to make the right arrangements for Scotland. Does he recognise how out of tune his Government are with the views of people in Scotland and with the needs of the Scottish economy? Does he not appreciate that it is absolutely essential that we have the powers to make the right immigration arrangements for Scotland, in order that our economy can thrive?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Lady's argument is not borne out by any available evidence. There is no material difference in unemployment and economic activity between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The reports produced by the Migration Advisory Committee raise a number of questions for the Scottish Government about the policies that they could implement to make Scotland a more attractive destination for migrants and, indeed, workers from elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): There are now 172,758 people in the growing asylum backlog. I have met asylum seekers in my constituency who have been housed for well over a year in overcrowded hotel rooms, many of them with small children who have nowhere to play. Will the Government finally admit that their illegal Illegal Migration Bill will make the backlog, and those people's traumatic wait, worse rather than better?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Lady is entirely wrong about that. The Illegal Migration Bill creates a fast and simple scheme whereby those who come here illegally, in small boats or otherwise, will have their claims processed not in months or years but in days or weeks, and will either be returned home to a safe country such as Albania or sent to a safe third country such as Rwanda. That will break the business model of the people smugglers by infusing the system with deterrence, and will bring about a substantial reduction in the numbers entering the country in this manner.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): In Bath the hospitality sector is a big driver of the local economy, but many of our wonderful hotels, restaurants, bars and pubs struggle to find enough staff, and there is the danger of closure or reduced working hours, which are bad for the economy. The Government's chaotic approach of making and breaking headline-grabbing immigration targets has completely eroded public trust, including that of employers. When will they come clean with the public, acknowledge that legal migration is driven by the labour market, and listen to employers and others in Bath's hospitality sector?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Lady seems to be arguing for significantly higher levels of legal migration than those that we have today. Given that 235,000 work-related

visas were issued last year, which is a substantial number, I do not think it wise to advocate a significant further increase. We want to see the numbers coming down.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has already accepted that we need immigration in this country to fill the skills gaps. Over the last 15 years, we have heard a number of vague promises about bringing immigration down—for instance, as we were reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the former Prime Minister David Cameron wanted to bring it down to the tens of thousands—but that has clearly not been achieved. I am not trying to score political points, but may I ask the Minister what level of migration he considers to be right for this country, whether he can give a specific figure, and whether it is achievable in the next decade?

**Robert Jenrick:** We have made a clear manifesto commitment to see numbers falling sustainably, and this week we are taking action that will have a material impact. As I have said a number of times this morning, net migration is far too high, and I worry that that is placing intolerable pressure on public services, on housing supply and on our ability in this country to integrate new arrivals. Those are the reasons why we need to take action, and if we need to take further steps we will do so.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I think the Minister needs to get his story straight on the asylum backlog. Is he saying that he wants to get it down—in which case he is not doing a very good job, because it is up to 172,000—or is he saying that he is keeping it high, with all the attendant costs and misery, in order to deter fresh claims?

**Robert Jenrick:** I have made it very clear that we want to get the backlog down, but I have also pointed out that Labour's only policy in respect of illegal migration is to clear the backlog faster. Open borders, faster processing—that is not going to work.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): The Minister and I will clearly never agree on whether immigration is too high, but we might be able to agree that it is too low when it comes to rural areas and the need for seasonal workers in the agrifood sector, given that a shortage of such workers left millions of pounds of fresh produce to rot in the fields. The Scottish Government have called for a bespoke rural visa scheme to help bring the labour that is needed to Scotland. Will the Minister agree to meet me so that we can tease out some of these issues, perhaps free from the pressures to generate headlines in tomorrow's press?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be happy to discuss that issue in the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman has raised it today. I am not persuaded that it is practical to create an immigration system whereby we have visas specific to certain parts of the United Kingdom or to rural as opposed to urban areas. We have a seasonal agricultural workers scheme; we recently announced that that will continue next year, and offered to increase it to 55,000 people a year. Last year, the scheme was capped at 45,000 and we had fewer applications than that, so it seems to be operating at the correct level, but we have to be careful about abuse, and last year, I am afraid, we

[Robert Jenrick]

saw a rise in the number of people who came across on that scheme and either were exploited by gangmasters or put in asylum claims. It would not be right to create a system that led to an increase in either of those activities.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister knows that I believe strongly that we have a moral obligation to help widows, children and orphans. That is why I believe we must have a robust immigration and asylum system that allows the vulnerable and the needy to find their new home. A constituent of mine, a hard-working young man, is seeking to bring his brother and his daughter to Northern Ireland—to my town of Newtownards, by the way—after losing all the rest of their family in the Turkish earthquake, yet we are at an impasse, which I find quite frustrating. What changes can be made to prevent an influx of unmarried young man but instead to focus on allowing in these devastated lone parents and their families?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be happy to look at that specific case, if the hon. Gentleman wishes. We do have schemes for dependants of migrants into the UK, and the figures published by the Office for National Statistics today show significant numbers of migrants' dependants or family members of British citizens entering the country.

On the broader point that the hon. Gentleman regularly champions, which is that the UK is a force for good in the world in welcoming people for humanitarian purposes, the numbers published today show that the UK is one of the world's leading countries for humanitarian visa routes. We should be proud of that and not accept anyone saying otherwise.

## Business of the House

11.17 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** Before I give the business of the House, I should like to make a brief statement, Mr Speaker.

First, I associate myself with the remarks made in the House this week about the anniversary of the Manchester Arena attack and the murder of Lee Rigby. My thoughts are with all those affected by those tragic events.

Yesterday, we had the sad news that the world has lost an icon, Tina Turner; but in the early hours of this morning, we in this place also lost our own larger-than-life character: our former colleague Karen Lumley, the Member for Redditch from 2010 to 2017. As well as the work she did for her constituents and in the service of Parliament on the Welsh Affairs, Finance and Transport Committees, and in government as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department of Health, Karen was a force of nature and a force for good. We will miss her, her amazing hairdos, and the joy she brought us all. We will cherish our memories of her. I know the whole House will want to send our love to her family, especially Richard, Lizzie and Chris, and all who knew and loved her.

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

**Penny Mordaunt:** She meant a lot to all of us.

The business for the week commencing 5 June will include:

**MONDAY 5 JUNE**—General debate on the role of local government in reaching net zero, followed by a general debate on delivering new housing supply. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 6 JUNE**—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 7 JUNE**—Opposition day (17th allotted day). Debate in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 8 JUNE**—General debate on National Carers Week, followed by a general debate on the work of the Council of Europe. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 9 JUNE**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 June includes:

**MONDAY 12 JUNE**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, followed by a debate on risk-based exclusion of Members of Parliament.

**TUESDAY 13 JUNE**—Remaining stages of the Procurement Bill [*Lords*].

**WEDNESDAY 14 JUNE**—Opposition day (10th allotted day, second part). Debate in the name of the Scottish National party—subject to be announced. Followed by a general debate—subject to be confirmed.

**THURSDAY 15 JUNE**—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 16 JUNE**—The House will not be sitting.

Members will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess on 20 July and return on Monday 4 September; rise for the conference recess at the close of business on Tuesday 19 September and return on Monday 16 October; and rise for the Christmas recess at the close of business on Tuesday 19 December and return on Monday 8 January 2024.

I will announce further recess dates and future business in the usual way.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** It is a sad moment when we lose one of our colleagues. I know Karen Lumley was loved across this place, and colleagues, including my former hon. Friend Louise Ellman and others, really appreciated the personal support she gave them and her dedicated work on the Transport Committee. We join the Leader of the House in sending our love and condolences to her family.

I will come on to Tina Turner shortly, but I also want to mention the parliamentary football team, who I hear have a match against the Scottish parliamentary football team. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) tells me he is the star player—who knew? We will find out.

We all join the Leader of the House in paying tribute to the queen of rock and roll, Tina Turner. She was an icon, a heroine to the domestic violence movement and a role model to all of us women doing our best work in later life. Perhaps the Leader of the House could draw inspiration from Tina today and search river deep, mountain high—there will be more—for all the Government's missing legislation. Where is it?

Let us start with the Leader of the House's failure to bring forward the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which includes important protections for dogs and cats, and would clamp down on the cruel practice of puppy smuggling. Labour has been calling on the Government for years to stop unscrupulous breeders cashing in by bringing puppies and kittens into this country with no concern for their welfare, which that Bill would have sorted out. Having already carried over the Bill from one chaotic Tory parliamentary Session to the next chaotic Tory parliamentary Session, the Bill will now expire on 8 June. I understand that, in the ministerial statement later today, the Government now plan to scrap the Bill, which is shocking. I have raised this at least five times over the past eight months. Is this Prime Minister so weak that he cannot even bring himself to stand up against evil puppy smugglers? What a way to run a Government.

Brace yourself for more Tina puns, Mr Speaker. Labour wants our schools to be simply the best—I am trying not to sing, but it is really hard—but the Government scrapped the Schools Bill. It was left to Labour to stand up for the safety of schoolchildren this week, when we tried to force Ministers to reveal the extent to which school buildings are crumbling on the Government's watch. For over a year, the Department for Education has known that the risk of building collapse is very likely, so why did the Leader of the House and her colleagues continue the Conservative cover-up and hide from parents exactly which school buildings are dangerous?

Also missing in those deep rivers and high mountains was the leasehold reform part 2 Bill. This week, it was, again, Labour that brought forward a motion calling on

the Housing Secretary to keep his promise to the thousands of people in Bristol West and the millions across the country who are living in leasehold properties. Labour forced the Government into committing to end the sale of new private leasehold houses and replace existing leaseholds for flats with commonhold. All that was needed despite a 2019 Conservative manifesto commitment and promises made almost every year by successive Housing Secretaries since then. The Tories are rowing back on their promises, and the Housing Secretary did not even bother to turn up—he rarely does these days. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the Housing Secretary will come to this House to tell us how he is going to implement Labour's plan for leasehold reform, which this House voted for on Tuesday? Just to remind the Leader of the House, as well as what I have already mentioned we want to give greater powers to residents over the management of their homes in the interim and crack down on unfair fees. When will leasehold residents in Bristol West and beyond see the Government get on with implementing these measures?

Finally, we clearly do need another hero—*[Interruption.]* Well spotted. Instead of having this weak Prime Minister spending all his time watching his back, we could have a Labour Prime Minister showing real leadership and strong action. We have shown this week that we are the party with a plan and we have the leader to deliver it.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for that. I join her in wishing the football team well and in what she says about the great Tina Turner, who was a complete icon. What a woman, what a life and what a legacy she leaves all of us.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not feel able to welcome the good news that we have had this week. Thanks to the stoicism of the British people and the hard work of their Government, inflation is falling, as are energy costs, and the International Monetary Fund has upgraded its growth forecasts for the UK. There has also been more inward investment, with £18 billion from the G7 host nation, to mention just one, and more funding for our schools. She did not welcome the news of the vast improvements that our reforms in England, and phonics in particular, have brought. I would be happy to compare the track record of our school buildings programme in my constituency with the legacy left by Labour. I recall that when I came into this House, I made a freedom of information request to the Department for Education to find out how much traffic and correspondence there had been from my Labour predecessor on trying to rebuild our decaying schools—there had been none. Since then, we have had a number of schools completely rebuilt and a new university technical college, and that position is echoed around the country. Even if she did not want to mention any of that, she could have at least welcomed the price of a good bottle of plonk coming down, thanks to red tape being cut.

The hon. Lady mentions the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, whose measures are manifesto commitments. It joins a long list of animal welfare reforms that we have brought in: new regulations for minimum standards on meat chickens; a ban on the use of conventional battery cages for laying hens; CCTV being made mandatory in slaughterhouses in England; microchipping being made mandatory for dogs; the modernising of our licensing system; protecting animals via Finn's law and Lucy's law; passing the Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019;

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

implementing humane trapping standards; passing the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022; passing the Ivory Act 2018; and many other things. Clearly, there are further measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill that we want to bring forward and that are manifesto commitments. We are still committed to those measures. In the statement later today, Members will be able to see both our commitments and our plan to deliver them, and, I hope, the opportunity to deliver some of those measures faster than the Bill would have allowed. The same applies to leaseholder reform, which I have spoken about many times: we are committed to those statements.

We are making good progress. There has been a lot of chat this week about things trying to slow us down, including “the blob”, which I understand was a poor-quality production from the 1950s. It was about an amorphous, spineless, shape-shifting jelly that keeps changing its position on things, is red in colour and must be stopped at all costs for humanity’s sake. That is not the civil service; it sounds rather like the Labour party. I may have just hit upon a plan for our next party political broadcast.

Further business and further recess dates will be announced in the usual way.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): We are grateful to the Leader of the House for the way that she spoke about our late colleague and to the shadow Leader of House for her response.

Recently, the examiners classified the Holocaust Memorial Bill as hybrid. Will my right hon. Friend, in peacetime, refer to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee the comments of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and of those who lead the Holocaust Memorial Foundation that they welcomed the Bill passing this step and that the Government actually spent their time trying to oppose the Bill being classified as hybrid. I also refer the Government to something in the press notice that said that one holocaust survivor has had to wait nine years from the time that this proposal was put forward to getting to this stage, and that he hopes to be able to be there when the memorial is opened.

Under the present plans, assuming that the Bill gets through both Houses of Parliament, with or without amendments—probably with amendments—that memorial cannot be completed for another five to six years. I suggest that the Government consider having the memorial—not necessarily the big one in Victoria Tower Gardens, but a smaller, more appropriate one—either there, in College Green, or Parliament Square and recognise that the learning centre is well suited at the Imperial War Museum, where one of Dame Diane Lees’s tributes was to create both the learning centre and the holocaust galleries. Everyone can then be satisfied and the holocaust survivors may be able to see a memorial in their lifetime.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter and for suggesting a pragmatic way forward. My understanding is that that suggestion has been made and rejected, but he will know that the Government are very keen to ensure that a memorial can be built in the swiftest time possible, precisely because we want the remaining holocaust survivors to be able to witness that.

I shall make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard his suggestions today.

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

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am sorry for the losses expressed by the Leader of the House, and we send our deepest condolences to all those affected, particularly the family and friends of Eilidh MacLeod.

I am not sure where to go with my business questions today. I could ask the Leader of the House about the £74 billion wasted in last year’s reckless September Budget and the resulting pain for householders, the questions hanging over the UK Government’s flagship freeport project and why the National Audit Office has not been asked to investigate it, the 4 million children living in poverty in the UK today because of Tory austerity, or the catastrophe of Brexit, which, of course, Scotland did not vote for. The truth is that it will not matter as the Leader of the House will once again ignore my question and instead read a pre-prepared script for the latest of her routine videos attacking Scotland’s elected Government, rather than answering for the actions of her own. So, I am afraid that it is in the spirit of hope rather than of conviction that I ask her this: can we have a debate in Government time in this Chamber on the infected blood scandal, so that the terrible accounts that those of us on the all-party group have heard from victims and their families might be told again and, hopefully, finally shame this Government into taking action now before it is too late for many of them. It is too late for Randolph Peter Gordon-Smith, the late father of my constituents, Justine and Rachel, but it is not too late for them to be treated equitably as the executors of his estate, and to be given proper compensation for all the traumas that they suffered as carers during the dreadful and distressing decline of their father until death finally overcame him.

In the light of the second interim report, Justine cannot understand—and neither can I—why registration of the estates of the unrecognised infected deceased cannot be completed through existing support schemes now, using the same mechanism as the first interim payment, without further complicating and prolonging matters through the establishment of an arm’s length body, as the report proposes. Do not these families deserve justice now where it can be delivered? I would be most grateful to the Leader of the House if she addressed that question before reading out the video script written for her.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks about Karen and the other remarks she made.

I admire the hon. Lady’s consistency in her lack of situational awareness. She mentioned management of budgets, and I remind the House that the SNP Government have mismanaged their budget; despite cutting £1.2 billion of spending on public services, they had a £100 million overspend. I remind her to compare our record on caring for children, where we have 400,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than when we took office in 2010.

As I mentioned in my remarks to the shadow Leader of the House, we have also had good news of improving life opportunities for children in England, with the good news that English schools have dramatically improved

our reading performance for nine and 10-year-olds. We are fourth best in the world, having inherited a situation where, in 2012, only 58% of six-year-olds were able to read fluently.

In contrast, in Scotland, both on health and education the SNP is letting the children of Scotland down. We have the worst-ever gap between the richest and poorest pupils, thanks to botched reform; literacy rates were falling before the pandemic and they have dropped dramatically further still. The only thing the SNP has managed to increase in education is the tax burden on teachers.

The hon. Lady raises the very serious matter of the infected blood inquiry. I have had the privilege of meeting many of those who were infected and affected by that appalling scandal, and I went to hear some of the evidence that they gave at the inquiry. It may fall to us in this place, on our shift, to put that right, but we must put it right. There is not just the original injustice that was done to those people, many of whom were children at the time, but the further layers of injustice that have happened with regard to their financial resilience, as many of them lost their homes and were not able to work, facing the appalling stigma and hardship that came with that. We have to put that right. That is why this Government set up the compensation scheme review to run concurrently with that inquiry, because we very much wanted, when that inquiry reported, to be able to make amends for that scandal. It would be an excellent topic for debate and I know that many Members in this House would want to attend if a debate was secured.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): When are the Government planning to hold another debate on the situation in Ukraine? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is an important opportunity for the nation's representatives to state their support for the Government's policy—also supported by His Majesty's Opposition—as a clear act of will that we are determined to see the Ukrainians reach a satisfactory outcome to this conflict, which means recovering all their territory? Will she consider having a debate on a motion setting out the Government's policy for approval by the House?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that matter. I think all Members of this House will want to continue to show our resolve in supporting the people of Ukraine. There are clearly big decisions being taken at the moment in various international forums, including at NATO. I know many Members of this House have engagements with those international forums and would want to express the contribution they are making on the Floor of this House. I will certainly raise the request with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for answering the business question, for announcing the Backbench Business debates of 5 and 8 June, and for confirming that our Committee will determine the subject of debates on 15 June as well. We have pre-allocated for that day debates on celebrating Pride month and on Government migration policies. I notice that there is to be a general debate on Wednesday 14 June. I am sure that the Government are already

thinking of this, but may I suggest to them that that debate should be about the 6th anniversary of Grenfell, which is the date that it would fall on?

We anticipate debates on departmental estimates in July. A trend has occurred whereby Select Committee Chairs and their Committees have applied for those debates, but I stress that we accept applications from any Back-Bench Member. We do not yet know exactly when estimates day debates will be scheduled, but we have been told that it will be in early July. Members are encouraged to review the note on estimates from the scrutiny unit, and to contact the Backbench Business Committee to apply for debates via the Table Office.

I had the privilege of seeing Tina Turner twice at Gateshead stadium, in 1990 and in 1996. She is a very sad loss. On both occasions, it was a sell-out 35,000 crowd. Of course, Gateshead stadium is also the home of Gateshead Football Club, which, I am sad to say, finished as runner-up in the FA Trophy at Wembley on Sunday. May I congratulate Halifax Town, the victors on the day?

**Mr Speaker**: That might be Nutbush City Limits—  
[Laughter.]

**Penny Mordaunt**: Very good, Mr Speaker.

May I thank the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for his work in advertising to colleagues—again, very successfully—the opportunities that his Committee brings for them to air their views on things that they care about. We have run debates on the anniversary of Grenfell, and he will know that there are ongoing discussions about that just to make sure that it is what everyone wants. I thank him for that.

My commiserations to the hon. Gentleman's team, but he is also very good at congratulating the victor.

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): Two years ago, Great Western Railway significantly reduced the direct train service between Bedwyn and Paddington. In this week's timetable change, it has halved the number of carriages on the 7.45 train from Newbury to Reading, which has led to significant overcrowding. All that is causing significant headaches for my constituents who commute, many of whom have written to me. Can we have a debate in Government time to address the adequacy of GWR's performance through the Newbury constituency and the wider south-east?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am very sorry to hear about the situation that my hon. Friend is dealing with. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the concerns that she has raised again today. It is absolutely vital that market towns, including those in her constituency, are properly served by the rail service. What her constituency is having to endure is, I am afraid, not appropriate.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time on the regulation of e-bikes and e-scooters? Privately owned e-scooters are uninsurable on public roads. Serious fires are caused by faulty lithium batteries and chargers, and thousands of bikes and scooters are just dumped on pavements every day. What should be a positive addition to transport is a hazard because of the Government's failure to act

**Penny Mordaunt**: These are important matters. I know that organisations are changing their policy because of the newly discovered dangers of e-scooters. I will make

[Penny Mordaunt]

sure that the Secretary of State hears the hon. Gentleman's remarks. The hon. Gentleman will know that the next oral questions at which he can raise this matter will be on 8 June.

**Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): May I join my right hon. Friend in sending love and condolences to the family of Karen Lumley? She was a great colleague.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is—as you know, Mr Speaker, as our president—a key organisation of the Commonwealth that is headquartered here in the UK. It wishes to change its status from a UK charity to be more properly recognised as an inter-parliamentary organisation. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House use her good offices to find time for my ten-minute rule Bill, which would enable the CPA to change its status, to make progress before we rise for the summer recess and help to secure the future of the CPA secretariat here in the UK?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work she is doing, which I know will be supported by Members across the House. We are incredibly proud to be the headquarters for the CPA and the incredible work that it does. We should retain that, and we want to retain that. She will know that I have made representations to the Foreign Secretary, and I know that he is working on this matter. I thank her for raising it again. I know that she will have not just my support but support from across the House in achieving that.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The loss of the former Member for Redditch is keenly felt across the House and, although I did not know her personally, as I only entered Parliament in 2017, I send condolences to her family on behalf of the Liberal Democrats.

It is incredibly disappointing to hear from the Bath Interfaith Group that the Government are removing funding for the Inter Faith Network. This comes just a few weeks after the King included “all faiths” as part of his coronation. At a time when polarisation and division are rife, we must support the Inter Faith Network to promote understanding, co-operation and good relations between all faiths. Can we have a debate in Government time on the efforts to promote interfaith relations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks regarding our former colleague. She raises an important matter. She will know that there are several sources of support and funding from different Departments, but I will let the Cabinet Office know her concerns and ask that the appropriate Department get in touch with her office about this matter.

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): Hopefully, my right hon. Friend will agree that, in seeking net zero, a considerable proportion of our energy production will have to come from nuclear power sources. On that assumption, could she induce a debate in Government time to allow Government to discuss their plans to speed up the provision of nuclear power units, be they large or small reactors, and the prospect of fission and fusion reactors throughout the whole United Kingdom?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The launch of Great British Nuclear and the competition for small modular reactors, along with pre-existing commitments to Sizewell C, for example, demonstrate our ongoing work to build the UK nuclear industry and meet those net zero objectives. We are classing nuclear energy as a green technology and including it in the UK's green taxonomy, which is the right approach. Others who take a different approach are severely misguided.

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): Coventry University Nursery provides excellent early years care and education for children of university staff, students and the wider community, but the university is threatening the nursery with closure, potentially as soon as September. Not only would that be devastating for the university staff, but the lack of supply of nursery spaces means that parents will be unable to find alternative nursery provision, forcing some—disproportionately women—to leave their jobs and degrees. Parents and unions are calling on the university to reconsider its plans and work to ensure the nursery's survival. Will the Leader of the House give Government time to discuss the importance of early years care and the value of Coventry University Nursery?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Lady's constituency. She will know that this Government have done a great deal to support the sector and increase access to free childcare. The next questions where she can raise this matter will be on 12 June, but I think she may have secured her objective today in raising that matter on the Floor of the House, and I hope the university is listening to what she says.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I associate myself with everything that has been said about our former colleague, Karen Lumley? She was truly a beautiful person. I also had the privilege of seeing Tina Turner play at the Edinburgh Playhouse as part of the Private Dancer tour. Above all else, she was an incredible live performer and that is important to recognise.

The Leader will be aware that Ofgem has announced that there will be a new lower limit in relation to energy costs for households, saving them something like £426 a year from this summer. But many small businesses, such as the Pyet restaurant and bistro in West Linton in my constituency, are trapped in energy contracts where they are paying way above wholesale prices. Will she bring forward a debate in Government time on the challenges that these small businesses are facing and what can be done to help and support them?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that important point about people on fixed contracts. Other issues, such as high standing charges, will still be ongoing concerns to Members of this House, even though we have had some good news and expect that trajectory to continue. The next Question Time on this issue is not until 4 July, but he will know that the Department is running surgeries in Parliament on these matters, particularly concerning support schemes and the ongoing issues with regard to bills. He will be able to seek advice on behalf of his constituents at those surgeries, but I will also make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his comments today.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I really value the work undertaken by the National Audit Office on behalf of our Parliament. Now, despite genuine concerns of financial shenanigans on Teesside, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has stopped an NAO study into the development corporation there. People may ask, “What’s Gove got to do with it?” [HON. MEMBERS: “Very good.”] Thank you.

The Teesside Mayor has previously called on the NAO to undertake an investigation, so to address parliamentary concerns, can we have a statement on the Government’s alternative proposal, and can any appointment include independent voices such as Amyas Morse, the former Comptroller and Auditor General at the NAO? The Government must take action to avoid accusations that concerns are being swept under the carpet—£650 million from the public purse is at stake.

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, on behalf of all Members, I thank the hon. Gentleman for that joke—a joke that only the Secretary of State for Levelling Up would appreciate. He will know that the Mayor of Teesside has called for an NAO-led inquiry—he has done that—and it is right that a lot of money has gone into that area. Just to briefly recap: £80 million to kick-start an investment zone; regeneration projects and levelling-up projects in Darlington, Redcar and Cleveland and Middlesbrough; more levelling-up funding for Stockton South, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland; in the Tees Valley Combined Authority, a £107 million investment, the first investment by the UK Infrastructure Bank; freeport status, a carbon capture cluster and a devolution deal; £46.3 million for the combined authority from the shared prosperity fund; millions for Middlesbrough rail station, Central Park business and lab workspace, and Teesworks gateway infrastructure; town deals for Darlington, Middlesbrough, Thornaby-on-Tees, Hartlepool and Redcar; and future high streets funding for Stockton, Loftus and Middlesbrough—all delivered by a Conservative Government and a Conservative Mayor, in contrast with what Labour did in the preceding 13 years, which was the square root of diddly squat and a disgraceful attitude in taking such communities for granted.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I send my love and best wishes to the family of our good friend Karen. She will be greatly missed.

My right hon. Friend will recall that, back in 2018, both Houses voted to decant from this place so that vital mechanical and engineering works could be carried out, yet the Public Accounts Committee has recently said that we are now spending £2 million a week on patching and mending. Does she share my concern and frustration at the lack of progress, and what more can she do to make sure that we preserve this globally important UNESCO world heritage site for future generations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work she did to move this forward when she was in this role. She is right: we all understand that this building is not just somewhere we work, but a national heritage site and an international, world-renowned UNESCO heritage site. It must be kept safe and preserved, and on a good day with the wind behind us, it should be enhanced, too.

My right hon. Friend will know that changes have happened to the governance of the restoration and renewal programme. That is making good progress. She is absolutely right, and I know that the Commission, the Speaker, and others at the other end of this place want us to get cracking on that programme. There should be no impediment to that, and I thank all Members of this House who are on those new governance structures and are helping us get there. We hope to get there by the end of this year.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Unless fair remuneration for postmasters to deliver Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services can be agreed by the end of June, DVLA products will be withdrawn from post office branches. This will be yet another challenge to the sustainability of our beleaguered post offices. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her views on the importance of our post offices? Given that the DVLA is a UK Government organisation, will she use her good offices to ensure that our postmasters are fairly paid for delivering DVLA services in our communities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** These are important services. Although many services are moving online, it is important that they are still accessible by other means, too. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Member’s concerns today, but I also advertise that the next questions to the relevant Minister will be on 8 June.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): NAViGO, a social enterprise in my constituency providing excellent mental health services, has been refunded from the Department for the recent pay award to NHS staff, but it has not received any recompense for the one-off payment relevant to 2022-23. That anomaly clearly needs correcting. It is providing the funding from its own reserves, which is a situation that cannot continue. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the appropriate Health Minister to come and give a statement on how they will correct this anomaly?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about this difficult situation in my hon. Friend’s constituency. I will certainly write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make him aware of the situation. I also suggest that my hon. Friend press the Minister on that matter on 6 June, which is in the first week back after recess.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Last week, five young people from Sudan, who are part of the All4One youth group and are seeking asylum in Manchester, wrote to the Minister for Immigration expressing worry for their families who are stuck in Sudan. They have no news about the safety or whereabouts of their loved ones and they are desperate to be reunited safely with their families. Can we urgently have a debate in Government time on the humanitarian support that the UK Government are providing in Sudan, and on what plans the Government have to open safe and legal asylum routes for those fleeing the violence in Sudan?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. Off the top of my head, Sudan is in the top 10 of nations that we take refugees from. Grant rates for asylum applications from that country range

[Penny Mordaunt]

from 86% to 94%. On safe and legal routes, more than 40% of those taken in via those routes were children. We already do a huge amount, and he will know we are doing a tremendous amount in-country as well. I do not want to give the impression that we are not taking people via safe and legal routes. The facts speak for themselves. I thank this group of young individuals for raising that issue and their concerns, and I hope what I have said has put their minds at rest.

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her positive remarks about the transformation that has taken place in Teesside and the Tees Valley thanks to Conservatives.

Last Saturday, I met my constituent Chloe Daley, who is 25 years old and is suffering from chronic Lyme disease caused by a suspected tick bite when she was eight years old. Chloe has faced more than 15 years of tests, treatment and misdiagnoses. She is now seeking to raise funds for further treatment that is only available in the United States. My right hon. Friend will be interested to note that, despite there being around 1,500 laboratory-confirmed cases of Lyme disease in England and Wales each year, it has not, save for one written question, been raised in this place since March 2019. Can she find time for us to have a debate on the study and treatment of Lyme disease, so that Chloe and others who suffer with the disease can have their voices heard?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I thank my hon. Friend's constituent, Chloe, for all the work she is doing to raise awareness of this matter. I understand that the UK Health Security Agency has today published the first quarterly report of this year on common animal-associated infections, which summarises the numbers and cases of laboratory-confirmed cases of particular diseases, including Lyme disease. The UK Health Security Agency is also working on public awareness campaigns, and we are actively seeking opportunities to work with academic partners and research partners, both nationally and internationally. I think it would be an excellent topic for a debate, and he will know that the next Health questions, when he can raise this issue, is on 6 June. I thank him for his campaign.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I pass on our condolences from the DUP to the family of Karen Lumley on her death.

In October this year, according to the GB border model proposals, checks on goods from or passing through Northern Ireland will be implemented and border control posts will be set up at Cairnryan and Liverpool. This is despite the promise that there would of course be frictionless trade between Northern Ireland and GB. Traders are being kept in the dark. They do not know the nature of the checks, what paperwork will be required, whether Northern Ireland goods will be exempt and, if they are exempt, what the criteria for that exemption will be. Despite all that, no statement has been made in this House. Indeed, when I raised these issues with the Northern Ireland Minister, he did not even seem to be aware of them.

Given the appalling nature of how people are being kept in the dark about a new set of border posts within the United Kingdom, and how this will disrupt trade

with Northern Ireland, can we have a debate in Government time on how the border control model is going to operate, and an explanation of why the promise of frictionless trade between Northern Ireland and GB is going to be broken?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this very important matter. This is not just about the integrity of the internal market; businesses need to understand what obligations will be placed on them by these processes and they want clarity soon. He will know that further work is ongoing on a number of fronts in the wake of the landmark Windsor framework. The next questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are not until 21 June, so I will write on the right hon. Gentleman's behalf both to him and to the Foreign Secretary, who is heavily involved in these matters as well, to make them aware of his concerns.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): First, can I associate myself with the words about Karen? She had a huge influence on me, and actually took me to my first Conservative party conference in 1993. She will be a huge loss to us and to her family.

At a meeting with Holcroft Court residents in Fitzrovia last week, I was concerned to hear of the myriad problems they are having with their landlord, Westminster City Council, including the failure to secure an EWS1 fire safety certificate, which means they cannot sell properties and cannot remortgage. Will the Leader of the House consider asking one of her ministerial colleagues to make a statement to the House outlining how important it is to ensure that landlords, including local authorities, know the importance of, and the obligations they have on, fire safety?

**Penny Mordaunt:** This is obviously a critical matter and I am very sorry to hear about the circumstances in my hon. Friend's constituency. She will know that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is very focused on ensuring that landlords deliver on their obligations to their tenants and that local authorities know what their obligations are. The next questions when she can raise this matter are on 5 June, but given its importance I will also write today on my hon. Friend's behalf to ensure that Ministers are apprised of the situation.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): In response to the shadow Leader of the House, the Leader of the House talked about the good news that inflation is coming down, but she forgot to mention that core inflation has gone up and food inflation is running at 20%. The Chancellor said in response to the inflation figures that the Government must do more to bring food inflation down, without setting out what he or the Treasury will do. I have raised the issue of food poverty with the Leader of the House over many months. The fact is that people in my constituency are now running out of the surplus food that they purchase from food pantries, as I am sure are people in her constituency and the constituencies of every Member across the House. Can she find time for the Chancellor to make a statement on the Floor of the House to tell us what he is going to do to tackle this spiralling food inflation, where prices are out of control and my constituents cannot afford to eat?

**Penny Mordaunt:** This is a very important matter and although we are faring better than, for example, other EU nations, it is a concern to many Members. We have faced some pretty unique circumstances, in particular the failure of a sugar beet crop that is doubling the price of sugar. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have a cost of living package totalling £94 billion. The Chancellor is keeping the House apprised of further measures he will introduce, but as the next Treasury questions are not for a while, I will make sure that my right hon. Friend has heard the hon. Gentleman's comments today.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I am really sad about the loss of Karen Lumley; she was a dear friend who first came to Parliament, with so many of us, in 2010—actually I am heartbroken.

Last Saturday, I was in Tiya's Café in my constituency—I meet there every Saturday morning—and a public servant said to me, "People would be going back to work in Ministries if they had desks to go back to." Many civil servants are not returning to their Ministries because when they get back, there are, I am told, no desks for them; they have to do their work in nearby cafés on the internet. May we have a debate on this subject?

**Penny Mordaunt:** It would not be appropriate to ask my officials in the box to wave and demonstrate their presence on the estate today, but I thank them. They are in every day, and I certainly think that is hugely important in building a team and ensuring people are trained: presence in the workplace matters. Each Department has its own policy on allocating desks, such as hot desks, and the attendance figures for Departments are publicly available, but I shall make sure the Cabinet Office has heard my right hon. Friend's concerns.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I extend my condolences to the Leader of the House. Losing a friend is a very sad and difficult time, but I am sure she will, like many of her colleagues, remember the good times for Karen. I knew her briefly before she left the House in 2017.

As for Tina Turner, I attended her first farewell concert in 1990 at the Scottish exhibition and conference centre in Glasgow. She was a great campaigner for women like her who suffered profound domestic abuse, and she was a committed Buddhist and a champion of the LGBT community. She will be missed.

When Parliament debated the establishment of the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme on 20 May 2013, the Conservative peer Lord Freud told the other place:

"The issue of individuals who have developed other asbestos-related diseases through negligence or breach of statutory duty and are unable to bring a civil claim for damages of course needs to be addressed."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 May 2013; Vol. 745, c. 690.]

After 10 long years, is it not time to right the vindictive wrong by having a debate in Government time to ensure that people with other asbestos-related diseases such as certain lung cancers gain access to the right of compensation?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks about Karen. The matter he raises is one for the Department for Work and Pensions. We were right to bring in the scheme and the legislation that

enabled it to be stood up. The next questions to that Department are not until 19 June, so I will write to it on his behalf to raise his concerns.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Last week, during Water Saving Week, I met Mr Garry Moore, an impressive constituent who has developed a new form of toilet. By using considerably less water, Mr Moore's new Velocity water-saving toilet has the potential to reduce household sewage by 28%. Mr Moore has applied to Ofwat for £500,000 of development funding in partnership with Thames Water and Exeter University, and he hopes to hear good news soon. Will my right hon. Friend wish Mr Moore well with his application? May we have a debate in Government time on the Government's targets to reduce water waste and how we can encourage local innovators such as Mr Moore from Westcliff to help us meet those targets?

**Penny Mordaunt:** May I congratulate my hon. Friend's entrepreneurial constituent? Who knows—the VT may take over from the WC. I wish Mr Moore well in his application. It is through such innovation that we will improve our management of water, which is a vital resource. I hope that my hon. Friend will keep us all updated on Garry Moore's progress.

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): This weekend, Stockport County are playing Carlisle at Wembley, so I wish to place on record my best wishes to the entire team.

I was recently contacted by an NHS hospital trust specialising in cancer care and treatment, which shared with me its problems in obtaining the tracer dye used in highly specialised PSMA PET-CT scans. Despite the importance of cancer scans to the delivery of high quality cancer care, when I subsequently asked the Minister for Health and Secondary Care about that in written parliamentary question 137980, he responded:

"We are not aware of any supply issues with tracer dyes used in PSMA PET scans."

All cancer patients deserve the highest quality care. Will the Leader of the House confirm who is right: the health workers in the hospital or the Department of Health and Social Care? Will she ask the Secretary of State to correct the record and address this serious and potentially life-threatening issue?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Diagnostics of all descriptions are a priority for the Government, which is why we have uplifted funding and created new diagnostic centres, in part to help us crack through the covid backlog. I strongly suggest that the hon. Gentleman raises this matter with the Secretary of State at the next questions on 6 June, and asks to speak to the Minister. I am not equipped to answer his question, but the Department will be. I strongly suggest that he seeks a meeting.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I associate myself with my right hon. Friend's remarks about our dear friend Karen Lumley. She certainly brightened up Prime Minister's Question Time—each week, we were not sure what colour her hair would be.

This weekend, on Sunday 28 May, Azerbaijan will celebrate independence day. Azerbaijan was created as the first secular Islamic republic at the end of the great

[*Bob Blackman*]

war, after the Soviets had taken over Russia. British troops were involved in defending Azerbaijan against an invasion by the Turks at the time. Azerbaijan was the first country to enable women not only to be represented in its Parliament but to vote—way before we did. However, that did not last long, because the Soviets invaded and, indeed, until 1991 it was part of the Soviet Union. It eventually gained its independence. Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating Azerbaijan's independence day and in welcoming the Speaker of the Azerbaijan Parliament to this country in celebration?

While I am on my feet—I crave your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am sure that the whole House will wish us well as the Lords and Commons cricket team embark this afternoon on our first match of the summer, taking on Harrow School in our annual fixture.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Good luck to the cricket team—I think they are going to need it. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Azerbaijan on the anniversary of its independence and wish those on the inward visit—the Speaker in particular, but also anyone else in the delegation—well. I thank my hon. Friend for enabling us to get that on the record.

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): My constituents, like those of many Members, have been impacted by the actions of Apostle Accounting. Many owe large amounts in repayments to HM Revenue and Customs, causing undue stress and anxiety. The current interest rates mean that people, including my constituents, are left owing staggering amounts. Given the scale of the issue, will the Leader of the House make available Government time for a debate on the support that HMRC can provide to the victims of the scandal and how to prevent it from occurring again?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am extremely sorry to hear about this ongoing situation and suggest that the hon. Lady raises the matter with the Business Secretary. The next oral questions are a little way off, so I shall ensure that the Department knows about her concerns and see whether it can offer some advice on how she can best support her constituents. What needs to happen with regard to that company is clear.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware of Labour's disgraceful ultra low emission zone tax raid on hard-working people in London, which will hammer businesses and people on the lowest incomes with daily charges of £12.50, or £25 for the likes of emergency workers working nights in my local hospital. Given that yesterday's data revealed that one in two vans are still not compliant, does she agree that the Labour party is not on the side of hard-working people? Will she please advise me on how we can have another debate on the subject as more of Sadiq Khan's claims over ULEZ go up in hot air?

**Penny Mordaunt:** There is immense concern about how the scheme was arrived at, how it was set up and how it is being administered, and it is causing problems not just for Londoners but for anyone who trades with London. It is clear that its primary aim is to be a

tax-raising measure. The Mayor of London has often got on his soapbox and spoken of his concern about the cost of living, support for small businesses in London and so forth. One thing that he could do to alleviate considerable pressures on Londoners, and people elsewhere, is to stop taxing people for going about their daily lives.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I suspect that the Leader of the House will be aware that more than 1,200 Afghan relocations and assistance policy-entitled Afghans are stuck in limbo in hotels in Islamabad. To be clear, they are people who supported our mission in Afghanistan and whom the Government committed to relocate to the UK. Having spoken to Ministers this week, I have been assured that the Cabinet Office, the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are working to house those Afghans who are already here, but I am concerned that there does not seem to be the same level of cross-governmental work to support those stuck in Pakistan. These are people who have done the right thing and seek to use the legal routes to which they are entitled. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House used her good offices to ensure that activity is undertaken to help get these Afghans to safety.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important point. Many Members will know these individuals—they will have worked with them or met them on visits—and I know that this is a concern to many Members on both sides of the House. It is quite right that we use our finite resources in this respect for those to whom we have the most moral obligation, and these individuals are firmly in that category. I shall ensure that all three Departments have heard his remarks and will encourage them to update the House on the work that I know is ongoing.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I have been supporting hundreds of residents of Coppenhall Place who overnight found themselves living in homes without planning permission, never expecting that, between them, Countryside and Labour and independent-led Cheshire East Council would let them down so badly. I welcome Countryside's commitment this week to cover residents' out-of-pocket costs, but will my right hon. Friend ask for a Minister to meet me to discuss how we can get all the residents a full investigation and the full compensation package that they deserve?

**Penny Mordaunt:** When I hear about such situations, I wonder how in God's name it could have happened. How on earth does a local authority enable and watch homes being built, in the full knowledge that they have not been through the systems in its planning department? This is a disgraceful situation, and the developer and the local authority need to step up and deliver on their moral obligations to the individuals who bought those homes in good faith. I suggest that my hon. Friend raises this matter at the next Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions on 5 June. He will know that the Secretary of State takes a dim view of local authorities and planning authorities that do not adhere to their obligations to their residents.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Far from being able to afford what the Leader of the House described as a good bottle of

plonk, by the end of this year another 1.3 million homeowners will be looking to renew their fixed-term mortgages, with most having to pay £200 or more extra per month. With inflation as it is, it does not bode well for interest rates. Can we have a debate in Government time on this emerging crisis and what her Government intend to do to support homeowners?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know that three of the Prime Minister's five priorities are focused on the economy and on enabling precisely the individuals he speaks about to be in a much better situation later this year. I shall certainly ensure that the Treasury has heard what he has said. He will know that the next Treasury questions are on 20 June.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): This year, the ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme celebrates its 850th anniversary. It is dated to the granting of our royal charter by Henry II in 1173. Sadly, that charter has been lost in the mists of time, but undeterred we have a full year of celebrations, including, on 3 June at Brampton Museum, an unveiling of a re-creation of that charter by Mr Glenn James, a renowned local illustrator. Will the Leader of the House praise Mr James for his efforts, and the leader of the council, Councillor Simon Tagg, and our new mayor, Councillor Simon White, for the work that they have done to put the celebrations together? Does she agree that a debate in this Chamber, perhaps an Adjournment debate, would be a fitting tribute to our history and longevity?

**Penny Mordaunt:** It is incredibly important for our communities that we celebrate important anniversaries, and I congratulate all who are working to make Newcastle-under-Lyme's 850th anniversary so very special. I am sure the whole House would want to congratulate Mayor White, Councillor Tagg and Mr James on the part they are playing.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): As Lord Etherton completes the LGBT veterans independent review, may I say thank you to the 1,155 veterans, serving personnel, families and professionals who returned to their darkest days and stepped forward to give evidence? For those who lived lives blighted by the historic ban on homosexuality in the armed forces, they now wait, as they have waited for decades, to hear their fate. I know the Leader of the House will fully appreciate the significance to those service personnel affected. There are rumours of a delay, so can she confirm that Lord Etherton has submitted his review and that it will be published on 8 June, not delayed, to allow for full parliamentary scrutiny?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I applaud the hon. Gentleman and I know that all Members of this House will want to echo the thanks he has given to those individuals for the contribution they made to that review. The next Defence questions is not until 26 June and his question is clearly time-sensitive, so I will make sure the Department has heard his remarks today and ask it to update him and the House.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): The latest National Farmers Union digital technology survey shows that rural areas are lagging behind national averages on broadband and mobile connectivity, creating a barrier

to growth. For example, less than half of respondents believe that their broadband speed is sufficient for the needs of their business, and 33% say that faster broadband would improve their ability to do business. From a safety perspective, only 21% of farmers report a reliable mobile signal throughout their farm. Can my right hon. Friend arrange for an urgent statement to be made to this House on progress on delivering the shared rural network and significant gigabit broadband roll-out for rural communities that we so desperately need?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend will know that this is a priority for the Government. Project Gigabit, our £5 billion mission to deliver fast reliable broadband across the UK, including rural areas, was launched in 2021. As he says, the £1 billion shared rural network deal with industry will focus on rural hotspots. He has just missed Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, which was earlier today, but the next Science, Innovation and Technology questions will be on 14 June. I encourage him to raise that matter then and I congratulate him on all the work he is doing to ensure that these services are delivered for his constituents.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on community safety, including the regulation of e-bikes and e-scooters? In doing so, may I express my condolences to the grieving families of Harvey Evans and Kyrees Sullivan, who died in the tragic incident in Ely in my constituency this week? May I also express solidarity with the residents who suffered the effects of the aftermath and the police officers who were injured in the ensuing disruption? May I also welcome the call from the grieving families for calm in the community to allow the independent investigation into the events that took place, so we can get to the truth of both the tragic fatalities of such young lives and the events that followed?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sure the whole House would want to join the hon. Gentleman in sending our condolences and our thoughts to the Evans and Sullivan families, and praise the families and other voices in the community who have called for calm and explained the role of the police, who are doing a very valuable job for that community. I shall make sure the Department has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns today. I am sure that if he were to apply for a debate, it would be well attended.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): The running costs for the Scotland Office topped £13 million last year. Judging by its website, its main activity seems to be the production of press releases, mostly extolling the virtues of other UK Government Departments, the subject matter of which allows it to churn out press releases at a prodigious rate of almost a whole two a week. At £180,000 a pop, it must be the most expensive press office in the world. May we please have a debate, in Government time, on what exactly is the point of the office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, what the Department does all day, and why on earth it costs so much?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I suggest that securing record-breaking and historic levels of investment from both the public purse and the private sector should be a starter for 10 for the work the Secretary of State is doing. I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Scottish Government have spent rather a lot of money and time

[Penny Mordaunt]

on preparing for independence, which was not the outcome of the referendum that was held. I also suggest that if he wants to preach prudence, he might like to talk to the SNP local authority that this week seems to have decided its main mission is not the emptying of bins or sorting out education, but actually trying to ban bouncy castles.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I recently spoke with my Action Greater Bedminster constituents about the benefits of new housing supply in south Bristol. Our Labour council is building more homes for the future, including a heat network to tackle emissions and costs, and social housing. I welcome the Backbench Business debate that the Leader of the House announced for 5 June, but people's biggest concern in relation to building new homes is access to primary care and GP services. Before that debate, can she make sure she talks to her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to come forward with answers and a plan to make sure we build homes for the future with GP access?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady's question has been highly efficient. She has saved me the trouble of a stamp, as the Health team are on the Front Bench. There will be two statements today on health, which she might like to attend. I hope she will be pleased with what the Secretary of State says.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Leader of the House is aware of the cuts to my local train services, which I have raised at business questions on a couple of occasions. The trains that the Government have left us with are old and cost a lot to run. Many do not have lavatories on them. They are very much in need of replacing. Can we have a debate in Government time to all raise our concerns about the condition of our rolling stock and our local rail services, and to plead for improvements and upgrades?

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is an important matter for the hon. Gentleman's constituents, which he will be able to raise on 8 June with the Secretary of State at the next available questions. In addition to this Government's investment in both rolling stock and the network, in stark contrast to the Labour Government, who only managed to electrify 13 miles of track, he will know that in those franchises there have been new standards on disability access and other services on those routes. The service that the hon. Gentleman's constituents are enduring needs to improve, and I encourage him to raise that with the Secretary of State.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): My constituents have been anxiously waiting for the already significantly delayed East West Rail proposal. Both East West Rail and the rail Minister stated that the announcement would be made this month. Today is the last sitting day that a rail statement could be made, but there is no sign of it. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is outrageous that the Government are deliberately trying to slip out an important announcement about East West Rail, which will have a devastating impact on some of my constituents, just before recess to avoid scrutiny?

**Penny Mordaunt:** With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that is the case. Neither he nor other Members of this House would be fooled by such a tactic if one were deployed. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Transport has heard the hon. Gentleman's questions. He will have an opportunity to ask the Secretary of State about these matters immediately following recess, but I will also raise it on his behalf.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The leading comment article in *The Times* this week bore the title "Whitehall Witch-hunt". It follows a decision to no-platform the chemical weapons expert—and Liberal Democrat member—Dan Kaszeta, who is loyal to this country but not to the Conservative party. The decision to rescind Dan's invitation to a conference at the Ministry of Defence is an attack on free speech. Will the Leader of the House ask the Cabinet Office to give a statement to the House reassuring Members that experts can continue to address civil servants, regardless of their personal politics?

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is a clear principle. As somebody who changed the methodology that we used at the Cabinet office in our resilience planning to make sure that we were dealing with a wider range of organisations, I appreciate why obtaining input from a large number of organisations and individuals is incredibly important to producing good policy and good outcomes for the people we are here to serve. I can give him that reassurance. He will know that he can raise specific matters with Departments in question time. The next opportunity to do so with the MOD is on 26 June.

**Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) led a fantastic Westminster Hall debate this week on the Healthy Start scheme. It was timely, as charities are warning of parents using unsafe means to feed their babies because the cost of infant formula has increased so much. The Government committed to reach 75% of those eligible for Healthy Start, but in Wakefield just 67% receive it, meaning that hundreds of families are missing out. Can we please have a statement on how the Government will increase awareness and uptake of that vital scheme?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. I refer him to the remarks made by the Minister who summed up the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who happens to be sitting on the Front Bench—business questions are very efficient today. The hon. Gentleman will know that funding has gone up since that scheme went digital. The Government are doing many other things to support people, including the early years strategy pioneered by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom).

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): This week, we saw the BBC unveil its new "Verify" unit. If only we had had such a unit in 2021 to scrutinise the disinformation we were told about the covid-19 vaccines. [Interruption.] The House might recall that we were told that the experimental treatments "will stay in your arm, not pass around your body"—completely incorrect. We were told, "These vaccines will stop you contracting and transmitting the virus"—completely wrong. Safe

and effective is not ageing well. All that disinformation was spread by the BBC itself, which is now holding itself as the arbiter of truth. *[Interruption.]* The question is, who checks the checkers, especially when they have such a chequered history on this subject? Can we have a statement on the discussions the Government have had with the BBC on the setting up of this new unit?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We have all just had a very important moment. We should pause for a moment, because I think we may have just heard the first cuckoo of spring. The hon. Gentleman will forgive Members chuntering from a sedentary position when he asked his question.

The only way that Members of this House and the public can be assured of the facts and arrive at decisions themselves is by having freedom of speech to be able to say things, but also the freedom to learn things and to be uncertain about things. Part of that is ensuring that people can take information from a wide variety of sources. We have reliable and honest journalism of high standards, for which the BBC qualifies, as does the House of Commons Library. I say to all people listening to this debate that we value these things greatly. They are part of our democracy and they should provide certainty for Members in this place and the public. The hon. Gentleman might like to make use of some of those services.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) about the murky dealings at Teesworks, the Leader of the House read out a list of Government spending agreements to the north-east. I am sure that those spending agreements are welcome to those living in the north-east, but that is not the point. The point is that we need a proper investigation into what has been going on in Teesworks with public money.

Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, at column 281 of *Hansard*, the Prime Minister said that the Levelling Up Secretary had "already announced an investigation". No such investigation has been announced to the House, either in a written or verbal statement. We need either a statement on the Floor of the House or a debate so that we can question any terms of reference of the investigation and what was not answered by the Prime Minister: the involvement of those hon. Members of this House who have a financial relationship with people involved with Teesworks, and whether they have influenced their decision.

**Penny Mordaunt:** These are important matters. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up has heard his comments. The hon. Gentleman will know that we will not have long to wait for the relevant departmental question time on 5 June, where all these matters can be raised. I am sure that once terms of reference and how such an investigation would be administered have been decided, the Department will update the House at the earliest occasion.

I was keen to get on record the investment, both public and private, into that part of our country, which has been neglected for a long time, because we need to retain business confidence. When we discuss these matters we should be led by the facts. All parties are calling for focus and scrutiny. I hope that will be delivered, and I hope that business confidence will be retained because that part of our country needs regeneration and opportunity, and that is what we are determined to deliver for it.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Can we have a debate in Government time about how MPs, in dealing with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office, are expected to support constituents in the face of obfuscation, confusion, delay and worse, including the wrong person's passport being sent out, when all those constituents are trying to do is to get their wee baby home from Pakistan to Scotland? I am really scunnered about this. Can the right hon. Lady tell me how support can be better provided in such cases, where there is clearly additional vulnerability and real pressure on those involved? Can she suggest any additional avenues that I can pursue to help my constituents, as I have already gone down all the roads that one would expect?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady's constituents are having difficulty in getting the relevant support. She says that she has accessed all available opportunities to assist. Has she made use of the surgeries that the Home Office provides and the consular service that the Foreign Office provides? Perhaps if she gives my office a little more detail, I shall see what the best route will be, but having dealt with officials in those Departments who are standing up those services, I know they are doing an amazing job and that they would want to help her constituents.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): The city of Manchester has a rich and vibrant history, in which those of different faiths and backgrounds have lived together, as well as stood together through difficult times and times of division, so I am concerned that Roger Waters is due to play at the AO Arena in Manchester next month. Mr Waters performed in Berlin this week and used the name of Anne Frank to stoke division, performed while dressed as an SS soldier and used the star of David on a giant pig to insinuate that Jewish people run the world, forcing the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester to issue a statement condemning his divisive actions. Will the Leader of the House agree that such concerts have no place in our society and should not go ahead? Will she agree to a debate in Government time on the record levels of anti-Jewish hatred in this country?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I think the whole House was shocked by what the hon. Gentleman said. I shall make certain that the Home Office has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns. This House has made great efforts, particularly in recent years, to ensure that the scourge of antisemitism is addressed and stamped out from our country. I shall make sure that all relevant Departments have heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I have the strongest legs in the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Leader of House always responds well to the questions that I put to her. Earlier this year, the Ukrainian Institute for Religious Freedom reported that

"at least 494 religious buildings, theological institutions, and sacred places have been destroyed, damaged, or looted"

by the Russian military as of January 2023. Russia's war against Ukraine continues to rage. Will the Leader of the House enable a relevant Minister to issue a statement in response to Russia's having recently shut down an

[Jim Shannon]

evangelical church in Ukraine: the latest incident in Moscow's systematic campaign of religious persecution against evangelicals in occupied Ukraine?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Attacking places of worship and religious buildings is a war crime. Russia has a long-standing record of domestic repression of religious belief, and that has only increased since its illegal invasion of Ukraine. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have welcomed the findings of the review to take forward the recommendations made in the Truro review, and we will continue to ensure that progress is made on freedom of religious belief, which is central to our wider work on human rights.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for continuing to raise these important issues. He will know about the work of the special envoy on freedom of religion or belief and the Foreign Office, which supports her. He will be able to scrutinise that on 13 June, at Foreign Office questions.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I have been very lenient in letting questions to the Lord President of the Council run, but they have been far too long. I give notice to the Chamber that I will not be so lenient in the next three statements, because we have a lot of business to transact today. I want to ensure that everybody has a chance to contribute in a timely fashion, so we will not have any statements at the beginning of questions; we will just have questions.

**Anna Firth:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Prime Minister's questions on 24 May, in reference to the Government's apprenticeship levy, the Leader of the Opposition claimed

"that almost half the levy is not being spent".—[*Official Report*, 24 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 282.]

In fact, in the year 2021-22, 99.6% of the levy budget was spent in England, according to Department for Education data. I am sure the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) did not intentionally aim to mislead the House, but have you had any indication from him or his office, Madam Deputy Speaker, that he intends to come back to the House to correct the record and provide clarity to right hon. and hon. Members?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. As I am sure she appreciates, it is not a matter for the Chair. What any Member says in this Chamber is a matter for that Member. The hon. Lady has put her case very well as to why the statistics, as she interprets them, are different from the statistics as interpreted by the right hon. and learned Member to whom she refers. Did she give notice that she wished to make a point of order?

**Anna Firth:** Yes, I did, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am grateful for her confirmation. It is a matter of interpretation of the statistics. They are not for me to interpret, but I am quite sure that the hon. Lady has made her point well and if there is a need for correction of the record, honourable behaviour in his House will lead that to happen.

## Patient Choice

12.47 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** May I begin by joining colleagues from across the House in paying tribute to the former hon. Member for Redditch? I entered the House at the same time as her. She was a much-loved and popular colleague. I send, as I know so many do, condolences to her family and her many friends.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about the action the Government are taking to improve patient choice as a way to help reduce NHS waiting times, one of the Government's five key priorities.

There are currently significant variations in waiting times across the country, and sometimes even within the same integrated care system. Analysis from the Patients Association suggests that improved patient choice can reduce waiting times by up to three months. When he took office last year, the Prime Minister promised to make it easier for patients to make a meaningful choice and to raise public awareness of the patient's right to choose.

Because of the pandemic, we have an NHS waiting list of over 7.3 million. Of that number, around 80% are waiting for outpatient appointments and around 20% are waiting for operations. Greater patient choice will help us address this built up demand including, where appropriate, opening more routes for NHS patients to get treatment free at the point of access in the independent sector, provided it meets NHS costs and standards, because we should use all available capacity in tackling the pandemic backlogs. For example, for patients currently waiting for ear, nose and throat treatment in London, the wait could be up to four months shorter with another provider, or with trauma and orthopaedics in the north-west, choosing another provider in the same region could cut someone's wait by three months.

Empowering patients to exercise their right to choose was one of the recommendations of the elective recovery taskforce, which identified it as a vital way of delivering the post-pandemic recovery. While we were addressing the 78-week backlog, analysis showed that 50% of those who were waiting more than 78 weeks for elective care were in just 11 trusts, which reinforced the opportunity offered by raising awareness of patient choice and making it easier for patients to exercise that choice in a meaningful way.

As well as cutting waiting lists, choice empowers patients to decide which aspects of the hospital service matter most to them. Patients themselves can prioritise the speed of care, alongside other factors such as distance travelled and the Care Quality Commission rating of the provider, or they may have had previous care from a consultant-led team and want to return to that team. We believe that empowering the patient is an intrinsically good thing, and we also believe that it cannot be the preserve of the groups with the sharpest elbows; it must be open to all. Research from the King's Fund has found that

"older respondents, those with no qualifications, and those from a mixed and non-white background were more likely to value choice."

When we combine improved patient choice with better real-time data and greater transparency, we can drive up standards. When patients know much more about

how their local hospital is performing, the pressure is on poor performers to close the gap with their near neighbours, where patients are often being treated more quickly.

The case for patient choice is clear, so with the aim of improving it, we are announcing significant changes in a number of areas. The first is technology. More than 30 million people have now signed up for the NHS App, and our target is for three quarters of all adults in England to be registered by next March. The app is already giving patients an improved “front door” for NHS services, and we are continuing to build on that. When GPs make a referral, they will make a shortlist of the five most suitable providers, and patients will be able to choose from the shortlist on the app. In March we completed the work of supplying a single list of providers for these shortlists, irrespective of whether the services are commissioned locally or nationally. While the Opposition’s plan to organise waiting lists on a regional basis might look like a good idea on paper, in reality it would add an extra layer of bureaucracy, whereas national lists under this Conservative Government will empower patients to choose treatment wherever they like. For example, a patient registered in Sheffield might happily choose to receive treatment in Manchester, particularly if family members there could help with the patient’s care and recovery.

The second area of work is improving the experience of those who are already on waiting lists, so that they can obtain treatment more quickly. From October this year, patients who have waited more than 40 weeks for an appointment, or who have a decision to treat but do not have a treatment date, will be able to request a transfer to another provider with a shorter waiting list. It is our ambition to expand that offer to other groups of long waiters, progressively lowering the waiting time towards 18 weeks as fast as is clinically possible.

Our third focus is on communications. We want to increase public awareness of today’s announcement through a national campaign, with the particular aim of reaching the groups who are most likely to benefit from greater choice as well as those least likely to exercise it. We will also ensure that general practitioners, and others who refer patients for consultant-led care, are offering more patient choice and are supported with the right training and technology.

Fourthly, we will focus on transparency. Real-time information on performance will be made more transparent to patients so that they can gain a clearer understanding of the variations from place to place, which will help them to exercise informed choice. We have worked to make ratings by the Care Quality Commission available and accessible to all, and we are merging the “My Planned Care” platform with the NHS website.

The Labour party has been busy announcing initiatives that we already have under way, such as expanding the NHS App, embracing virtual wards and stopping kids from vaping, but while its members have been busy talking in England and failing to act on behalf of patients in Wales, we have been busy acting to empower patients, and today’s announcement is another example of that. We are committed to cutting NHS waiting lists, and the measures that we have announced will help us to do that—by empowering patients to gain access to faster treatment in hospitals with available capacity; by giving patients technology enabling them to exercise their right to choose, and giving them the information

that will help them to make that choice; by increasing communication to raise public awareness of the right to choose; and by fostering much greater transparency and, through funding, following the patient, to encourage trusts to improve their offer to patients to better match the service offered in hospitals elsewhere.

Taken together, those measures will enable patients to access treatment more quickly and meet the Government’s priority of reducing NHS waiting lists. I commend this statement to the House.

12.55 pm

**Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also join him in paying tribute to the late Karen Lumley and, even more important, extending condolences to her family and her many friends on both sides of the House—but particularly on the Conservative Benches—for their loss. I know that the sadness is felt very deeply throughout the Chamber.

Let me now turn to the first of today’s two statements from the Health Secretary. It seems that quantity is not matched by quality. In a week in which the Leader of the Opposition announced Labour’s plans to give patients more choice, with regional waiting lists for care and more power through the NHS App, the Conservatives’ big idea to cut waiting times is to give patients a choice that they already have. It is thanks to the last Labour Government that patients waiting for planned treatment already have a right to choose an alternative provider if they have been waiting too long.

Beneath the spin, the Health Secretary’s announcement is actually a watering down of the measures that are already in place. He says that patients will have the right to choose an alternative provider if they have been waiting longer than 40 weeks, but in 2019 the Conservatives said that they should have that right after 26 weeks—which, even then, was worse than the 18-week standard to which patients were already entitled thanks to the last Labour Government. Is it not the case that he is once again shifting the goalposts because he cannot even meet his own standards, let alone those that patients expect?

The Health Secretary concluded his statement by talking about his Government’s record. That was a bold move, because 7.3 million people—the highest number on record—are currently waiting for planned treatment in England. As usual, the Health Secretary said that that was because of the pandemic, but the figure was already at a record high before the pandemic. Behind this shocking statistic are real people, waiting, waiting, waiting in agony. It does not matter how often the Health Secretary says that the Government are committed to reducing the waiting lists; people can see with their own eyes the numbers that do not lie, which show that waiting lists are getting higher and things are getting worse, not better.

The Health Secretary’s total incompetence when it comes to preventing strike action in the NHS has inflicted untold misery on patients. So far the total number of appointments affected by NHS strikes in recent months is more than half a million, a figure that the Health Secretary called “deeply disappointing”. Well, that is something on which he and I can agree, for once, but with another round of strike action planned by junior doctors, he must surely see the risk to patient choice and waiting lists. What is his plan? Ministers blame strikes

[Wes Streeting]

as if they were mere bystanders, but it was their refusal to speak to nurses, paramedics and junior doctors that forced them out on strike in the first place. I am afraid the Health Secretary's warm words today are not going to cut it, when all he is doing is giving more patients more choice over where their next appointment or operation is to be cancelled because of the strikes that he and the Prime Minister have failed to prevent.

Finally, let me turn to the supermassive black hole that is at the heart of today's announcement. I will keep on reminding the Health Secretary of this until the penny drops. It does not matter which hospital patients choose; they can only receive care on time if there are enough staff to treat them—so why are we still waiting for the NHS workforce plan that the system is crying out for? Why do we have net migration at the highest level ever, with the Government over-reliant on recruiting staff from overseas because they cannot be bothered to train home-grown talent? Where is the plan to train the doctors and nurses whom the NHS is so desperately short of? Labour has set out our plan to double medical school places and train 7,500 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses a year, which we would pay for by abolishing non-dom tax status. [Interruption.] I am afraid that Conservative Members like non-doms more than they like nurses, but the public are not with them on that. Let me once again, in the spirit of generosity, before we break for the recess, offer the Secretary of State our fully costed, fully funded plan. It is available to him—[Interruption.] Conservative Members should not laugh too much now. I wager that, before we break for the summer, the Government will finally swallow their pride and announce the doubling of medical school places. We will wait and see.

After 13 years of Conservative Government, people can see for themselves where it has landed this country and compare it with 13 years of Labour Government, which delivered the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history. We will offer real choice and cut waiting times, so that the NHS is there when people need it. We did it before; we will do it again. We have the ideas and we have the plan. That is why only Labour can build an NHS that is fit for the future.

**Steve Barclay:** Not since the famous 1p on income tax from the Lib Dems, which was to be spent on every issue going past like a passing bus, have we heard of money being spent in as many different ways as the non-dom money. No wonder the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said it with a smile; the whole House could see how credible that proposal is.

The theme of the hon. Gentleman's response was comparison, so I think we should compare the substance of the announcement on patient choice with the situation where Labour is in office. In Wales, patients do not have the ability to choose where they receive treatment; that right is not offered to patients. In NHS Wales, patients registered with a GP in Wales do not have a statutory right to choose at which hospital they receive treatment. We can compare what a Government in England are doing—empowering patients, giving them that choice as well as the information and technology they need to make it—with NHS Wales, run by the Labour party, which deprives patients of their choice.

I hesitate to draw the comparison with Wales, however, because another Labour Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), says that he does not want Labour to be judged on its record in Wales. That is slightly confusing because the leader of the Labour party, no less, says that he wants Labour in Wales to be

“a blueprint for what Labour can do across the UK”.

So they cannot even compare among themselves, never mind compare between England and Wales.

The hon. Member for Ilford North talked about strike action but seemed to skirt around the fact that the Government have reached a deal with the NHS Staff Council in relation to Agenda for Change staff—a deal that his own union, Unison, voted 74% in favour of. His own union—the union that gives him money—supported the deal. He chides us about junior doctors, but those of us who were present in the Chamber the last time heard him say that he did not support the junior doctors' demand for 35%. When we did negotiate with them, they even increased their demand to 49%, when next year is added in, further confusing the position.

It will come as no surprise to the House to discover that people in Wales are almost twice as likely to be waiting for treatment as people in England. That is the true comparison that we are addressing. We can see that situation play through to people waiting more than 18 months. In England, we have virtually eliminated 78-week waits—at the end of March, it was under 11,000—but in Wales, it will come as no surprise to Members, the number was closer to 75,000, and of course Wales has a smaller population. So we can compare waiting times, which we in England are bringing down. We have an electives plan, we cleared virtually all the two-year waits in the summer and over 90% of the 18-month waits at the end of March, which contrasts with the situation in Wales. We are giving patients choice, enabling them to move if they want to in order to get quicker treatment elsewhere. We are on the side of patients. We can see what the Labour party is doing by its disastrous performance in Wales.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

**Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** This form of patient choice has of course been available for at least 15 years; it just has not been made available to patients. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the referral management centres sitting at integrated care board level will be compelled, not asked, either to change that or to get out of the way altogether? Given that the vast majority of people on the waiting lists are already there with a specific trust, how exactly will they be given the option either to stick where they are, or to twist and exercise that choice to receive treatment sooner?

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a shrewd point. Yes, the referral centres are part of this system. The key focus is on the initial GP referral and how we facilitate that with better data, transparency and tech, but the referral centres are a part of this. We want to roll it out to the 40-week waits from October, and to bring waits down to 18 weeks. There is a clear plan to achieve that wider scope, and that is what I have set out to the House today.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Karen Lumley was indeed a wonderful woman. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family at this difficult time.

The statement is admirable, but how will patients have a choice if the Secretary of State does not address the workforce issue? When will he do that? When will he speak to the junior doctors?

**Steve Barclay:** As I touched on in my statement, the choice is there now; it is available right now, but only about 10% of patients exercise it. There is massive variation in the system now, with the existing workforce. We are increasing the workforce. We have made a commitment to produce a workforce plan, but the point is that there is variation within the system now. What patient choice is about is empowering patients to take advantage of it and to access treatment sooner, for example, by being willing to travel often short distances to access it.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I really do welcome the revolution in patient choice that my right hon. Friend has outlined, but as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on minimally invasive cancer therapies, it is clear to me that some cutting-edge technologies and treatments are available only in certain trusts under certain consultants. Can he confirm that, within the choice available to them, patients will be able to choose centres that provide unique treatments, rather than the universal treatments that are available everywhere?

**Steve Barclay:** Yes, I can. Part of this is allowing patients to choose according to a number of factors. Some may have had treatment previously and want to go back to a particular consultant-led team. Some may want to look at CQC ratings and other performance metrics. Some may want the convenience of not travelling—relatively small numbers say they are not willing to travel; far more are willing to do so. Patients will look at a range of factors when shaping their decision. The key is to have transparency and the technology that enables patients to take control.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): Of course we all want to see real patient choice, but for millions of people who are waiting in pain, a choice between travelling miles away or paying to go private is no choice at all. We all know that the key to unlocking millions of people from the NHS backlog is tackling the crisis in the workforce. Why on earth are we spending precious parliamentary time talking about the NHS app instead of the NHS workforce?

**Steve Barclay:** We are talking about the wider workforce. The hon. Lady mentions private capacity. This patient choice will enable people to make much better use of the independent sector and to do so free at the point of access. Given the size of the challenge of pandemic backlogs, the question is: how can we make full use of capacity across the NHS and in the independent sector?

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): The problem of variation in waiting times is symbolic of all sorts of variations across the NHS. My previous employer, the national clinic audit programme commissioner, focused on identifying and spreading good practice. Will the Minister join me to meet the programme's CEO, Jane

Ingham, to hear her insights on how to tackle this challenge, and also join me in paying tribute to her as she retires after 10 years of dedicated public service in this role?

**Steve Barclay:** I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Jane Ingham, who, as he says, is retiring after 10 years in that post. She has a long history of working to improve the quality of healthcare in the NHS and it is right that we pay tribute to her. I am sure the ministerial team are keen to engage with her on lessons to be learnt from her career.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): The Secretary of State's words on patient choice will ring hollow until he addresses the NHS workforce crisis. In ophthalmology, 80% of eye units do not have enough consultants to meet current demand, and 65% of eye units had to rely on locums last year. Labour has a fully funded plan for the biggest workforce expansion in NHS history. Where is his plan? He has not answered previous questions. Can he say whether this workforce plan will actually address the deficit in eye health and ophthalmology?

**Steve Barclay:** As the record shows, numbers have been increasing. There are 37,000 more doctors and 52,000 more nurses within primary care than in 2010. We have already reached our manifesto commitment on additional roles in primary care to deliver more appointments. We have repeatedly said that we will bring forward a workforce plan and we are committed to doing so shortly.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on promoting more choice than in the socialist republic of Wales, which is a pretty low bar, but can we go further and promote real choice by adopting two previous Conservative policies? Both would be wildly popular. The first is a patient passport, by which a patient could get a free operation on the NHS, or take the same cost to a private or charitable hospital, which would promote choice and accountability. The second is tax relief for private health insurance, which is a matter for the Chancellor, but the Secretary of State could have a quiet word with him.

**Steve Barclay:** My right hon. Friend has lobbied me on this issue a number of times, including outside the Chamber. As such a senior parliamentarian, he well knows that tax is a matter for the Chancellor, who I am sure will have noted his wider point.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his very positive statement. He referred to long waiters, the second area of work. One oft-neglected area is access to specialist in-patient services for eating disorders. My constituents in Northern Ireland do not have access to a clinic to allow them a choice between a weekly weigh-in with their GP and specialised treatment. What discussions, and practical and physical assistance, can he offer the Department of Health at the Northern Ireland Assembly to help people with eating disorders?

**Steve Barclay:** As so often, the hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point about how we tackle the serious issue of eating disorders. As he knows, we are increasing our funding for mental health. It is a key priority in the long-term plan, which is providing an extra £2.3 billion a year. On different approaches, we

[*Steve Barclay*]

are looking much more actively at our use of digital apps and platforms, which is an area that the Chancellor specifically funded in the last Budget. We are also looking at how we address mental health issues earlier, particularly for children. We are rolling out mental health support teams in schools because, obviously, early intervention has significant benefits and targeting schools is a great way to do that.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on a profoundly Conservative step forward in dealing with the waiting list issue. Does he agree that the provision of greater patient choice holds out the possibility of stimulating more investment in private sector capacity, particularly for volume procedures such as hips and knees? However, the private sector, to make such heavy investments in facilities, requires long-range certainty. As waiting lists fall, will he review the threshold—the time limit—at which patients can seek private sector assistance in getting their operation done more swiftly, so that the efficiencies of the private sector can be realised for the system as a whole in the longer term?

**Steve Barclay:** My right hon. Friend raises a very good point. As he knows, there is interaction between what is and is not on the balance sheet. His point particularly relates to the roll-out of diagnostic centres. I have looked at the facility in Blackpool that is using artificial intelligence in endoscopy and picking up 20% more cases than would be seen with the human eye. We are thinking about how we use the private sector to add more capacity at scale and pace, and how it can use the latest technology. Obviously, we need to do that in a way that is compliant with Treasury rules. Ensuring there is greater capacity in the system—but doing so where it is free at the point of access to NHS patients—is an area where we have already done quite a lot. However, there is always scope to look at it afresh.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the statement, which will undoubtedly help waiting lists in my Keighley and Ilkley constituency. Can he confirm that this expansion will be available first to those who have been waiting longest?

**Steve Barclay:** I can confirm that, from October, we will roll this out to those who have been waiting more than 40 weeks, and we will look to bring down that threshold over time. We will focus first on the longest waits.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I share my right hon. Friend's desire to increase patient choice and reduce waiting times. One way to do that in south-east London is to expand further the number of services at Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup, which is an excellent modern hospital with the capacity to expand services. However, there needs to be a will within NHS leadership, especially within the new integrated care boards, to get on with doing so, particularly for community diagnostics. Will my right hon. Friend please agree to meet me to discuss further how we can improve patient choice and patient outcomes in Bexley?

**Steve Barclay:** I share my hon. Friend's desire. As part of this announcement, payment will follow patients to incentivise trusts to take on more, which further underpins patient choice. We are actively engaged on accelerating the diagnostic centres and, as a result of ministerial intervention, we have speeded up the diagnostic centre programme. I look forward to updating the House on how many additional scans and tests will now be done this year, as opposed to the original plan for those tests to be done in 2024. I am very happy to have further discussion with him.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I normally allow a bit of movement between statements, but it seems that a change of scene and personnel is not necessary as everyone is already in place.

## New Hospitals

1.16 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** It is like a two-for-one offer.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the new hospital programme.

As we celebrate 75 years of the NHS this summer, we must continue to set up its success for the 75 years to come. At the heart of this is our new hospital programme, the biggest hospital building programme in a generation, which will help us to deliver on our manifesto commitment to build 40 new hospitals by 2030. Today, I reconfirm to the House our commitment for 40 new hospitals to be built by 2030.

We made our manifesto commitment in 2019, and in 2020 we listed 40 schemes as part of the new hospital programme. Since we formally launched the schemes, we have learned more about the use of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, more commonly known as RAAC. RAAC is a lightweight form of concrete that, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s, was commonly used in the construction of a number of public buildings, including hospitals—often on roofs and occasionally in walls and floors.

We now know that RAAC has a limited lifespan, with difficult and dangerous consequences for the people who rely on or work in those hospitals. I know this has caused considerable concern to colleagues in this House, to NHS staff in those hospitals and to constituents who are treated in them.

We remain committed to eradicating RAAC from the wider NHS estate. As part of the spending review allocation up to 2024-25, we allocated £685 million in immediate support to the affected trusts, but in some cases we must go much further. Seven hospitals in England were constructed, either wholly or in major part, with RAAC, and an independent assessment shows they are not safe to operate beyond 2030. Two of the hospitals are already part of the new hospital programme, namely the West Suffolk Hospital and James Paget University Hospital. The five remaining hospitals have submitted expressions of interest to join the programme but are not yet part of it. Those are Airedale General Hospital in Keighley, Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, Hinchingsbrooke Hospital near Huntingdon, Mid Cheshire's Leighton Hospital, and Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey.

We accept in full the independent assessment that these hospitals are not safe to operate beyond 2030. Today, I confirm to the House that we will expand our new hospital programme to include those five further hospitals built with significant amounts of RAAC. With the two RAAC hospitals already in the programme, the seven RAAC hospitals will be rebuilt completely using a standardised design known as Hospital 2.0, with the aim of completing all seven by 2030. I can confirm to the House today that these new hospitals will be fully funded.

I want to take a moment to thank all those who have campaigned so tirelessly for new hospitals to be built to replace the existing RAAC hospitals, including my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), who have championed Airedale

vociferously; my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who has campaigned so strongly for Frimley; my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who lobbied hard for Hinchingsbrooke; my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who led the campaign on Leighton Hospital; and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who is my Parliamentary Private Secretary, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who all campaigned so assiduously for the hospital in King's Lynn.

Taken together, the new hospital programme represents a huge commitment to strengthening the NHS estate. Since 2020, we have committed to invest £3.7 billion by the financial year 2024-25, and we expect the total investment to now be more than £20 billion for the programme as a whole. Resolving the uncertainty over the RAAC hospitals, which today's announcement achieves, in turn allows much-needed clarity for the rest of the new hospital programme. The programme has been divided into cohorts 1 to 4, and construction in cohort 1 has already started. Cohort 1 contains eight schemes. Two hospitals are already open to patients, with the new Louisa Martindale Building at the Royal Sussex County Hospital in Brighton due to open later this year. Work at Moorfields Eye Hospital is due to start imminently, having cleared its final business case.

Cohort 2 comprises 10 schemes. The following schemes will now be ready to proceed, in line with plans set out by the respective trusts: the National Rehabilitation Centre; Derriford emergency care hospital in Plymouth; Cambridge Cancer Research Hospital; Dorset County Hospital in Dorchester; and St Ann's Hospital, Christchurch Hospital, the Royal Bournemouth Hospital and Poole Hospital, all of which are in Dorset. A further two schemes within cohort 2, Shotley Bridge Community Hospital and the women and children's hospital in Cornwall, will also be approved to proceed, but in line with the standardised design elements we are promoting through Hospital 2.0, on which I will set out further details in a moment. As such, with the uncertainty that surrounded the RAAC hospitals now addressed, all the cohort 2 schemes can proceed, and they will be fully funded.

The cohort 3 schemes include major hospital new builds at Sutton, Whipps Cross, Hillingdon, Watford, Harlow, Leeds and Leicester. Today's announcement confirms that those schemes will now proceed and be fully funded. They will be constructed using the Hospital 2.0 standardised approach. It is worth reminding the House of the merits of using that methodology. First, although longer will be taken on the initial design, the current approach of each scheme constructing its own bespoke design has meant that the average time from design to completion of a major hospital has been about 11 and a half years. By embracing modern methods of construction, we will massively speed up the construction phase and, in addition, accelerate Treasury and other government assurance processes. There has been much debate to date on when hospitals start, but the more important issue is when schemes are completed. A standardised modular design has been shown to work in other sectors—for example, when building schools and prisons—and is widespread across the private sector.

[Steve Barclay]

Today's announcement confirms that all cohort 3 schemes can now proceed. In turn, enabling works that had been held up due to the uncertainty about the RAAC hospitals can now progress. I pay tribute to right hon. and hon. Members who have campaigned strongly for the cohort 3 hospitals to proceed. They include my right hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), and my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson). I know that not all of them can raise points during this statement, but the latter three have all championed Harlow and its case. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), to name just some of those who have raised these issues. *[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order.

**Steve Barclay:** Opposition Members have asked for the update and called for the programme, but they do not want to hear about it when the announcement is being made.

Turning to the hospitals in cohort 4, two of the schemes—West Suffolk Hospital and James Paget University Hospital—are RAAC hospitals. As I touched on a moment ago, they have been confirmed as part of the seven RAAC schemes. They will therefore be funded for completion by 2030. Four more hospitals in cohort 4 remain on track for completion by 2030: Milton Keynes University Hospital, Kettering General Hospital, Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton and Torbay Hospital. Again, I pay tribute to the Members for those constituencies, including my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

The remaining seven hospitals within that cohort will also proceed as part of the new hospital programme. The work will start on those schemes over the next two years, but they will be part of a rolling programme where not all work will be completed by 2030. That is a reflection of the disruption that two years of the covid pandemic caused, as well as the pressure from construction inflation.

Some work within cohort 4 will start next year. That includes a new surgical hub at Eastbourne, alongside the discharge lounge already under construction. We will discuss key worker accommodation on the site with the trust, as part of engagement with the local housing association. At Charing Cross Hospital in Hammersmith, work will begin on temporary ward capacity to enable the floor-by-floor refurbishment to proceed. In Nottingham, work will begin on a new surgical hub and three new operating theatres will begin as part of the wider redesign, taking forward the Ockenden report recommendations. In Lancashire, a new surgical hub will be opened at the Royal Preston Hospital, which is due to be completed this year.<sup>1</sup> We will reconfigure services across two trusts. I am sure that one of those sites will be of interest to Mr Speaker, as it is expected to be near Chorley. We are in active discussion with the Royal Berkshire Hospital, given the problems with the existing site, which had already made a 2030 completion date very stretching.

In addition, we are building three new mental health hospitals in the Surrey and Borders, Derbyshire and Mersey Care areas.

Turning to Devon, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox), who have secured new community diagnostics centres at North Devon. The discharge hub there is near completion, and we will take forward discussions with the trust and the local housing association on key worker accommodation over the next two years, as the first part of the North Devon new hospital build. We will discuss the original refurbishment proposal alongside the new build Hospital 2.0 option.

In summary, the cohort schemes will all proceed, but the commitment to completion by 2030 applies to the 40 schemes set out today, which meets our manifesto commitment to build 40 hospitals by 2030.

Finally, let me set out the merits of the Hospital 2.0 approach. Building new hospitals in this way has clear advantages. Construction experts estimate that with modular design, the efficiency saving will be in the region of 25% per square foot. That is essential in addressing the pressure of construction inflation and unlocking the additional schemes that are being absorbed as a result of the RAAC announcement.

There is one key risk to today's announcement: the plan announced by the Labour party. As we speed things up, it is determined to grind them to a halt. The plan Labour set out on Monday said:

"as a first step, before we commit to any more money, we'd make an assessment of all NHS capital projects to make sure money is getting allocated efficiently".

So the risk to these schemes is from those on the Benches opposite.

Today's announcement confirms more than £20 billion of investment for the NHS estate. It confirms that all seven RAAC hospitals, which NHS leaders have called on the Government to prioritise, will be prioritised, with complete rebuilds using modern methods of construction. It allows all cohort 2 schemes to proceed once business cases have been agreed, and modular build will be used for two of those schemes. It gives trusts the certainty to begin enabling works on major schemes in cohort 3 and a package of early work for schemes in cohort 4, two of which will be accelerated as part of the RAAC programme.

In 2019 we committed to the biggest hospital building programme in a generation, and today we confirm the funding to build 40 hospitals by 2030. I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.30 pm

**Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab):** Normally, I would thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, but by the time it arrived we were already in the Chamber. But it is all right; we will manage. I just thought, "What an astonishing coincidence that so many Conservative Members, whom the Secretary of State name-checked, happened to find their way to the Chamber at precisely the right moment." It is almost as if they knew in advance. But no, I shall just assume that they sped to the Chamber faster than the Home Secretary

1. *[Official Report, 5 June 2023, Vol. 733, c. 7MC.]*

down the motorway. I think we can assume that, with today's migration figures, the Government have concluded that today is a good day to bury bad news. I will come on to respond to the statement, but I just wonder whether, at this stage in the lifecycle of 13 years of Conservative Government, the public might have just begun to see through the over-promising and under-delivering.

The NHS estate is crumbling after 13 years of Conservative neglect. Across England, backlog maintenance costs have more than doubled, from £4.7 billion in 2011-12 to £10.2 billion in 2021-22, and we see the consequences of that. Leeds Teaching Hospital saw more than 100 raw sewage leaks last year. Let us not beat about the bush, we are talking about urine and faeces leaking into wards and patient rooms. Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust was forced to suspend some services because of an uncontrollable rat infestation. One of the Health Secretary's own local hospitals in King's Lynn has earned itself a special accolade—the most propped hospital in the country. More than 4,000 steel and timber support props are supporting its dilapidated roof—enough to extend for six miles. We have leaking sewage, rat infestations and collapsing roofs. We are in this mess because of Conservative neglect and mismanagement. They literally did not fix the roof while the sun was shining and now patient safety is at risk. Indeed, on the RAAC hospitals in particular, the Secretary of State said in his statement:

“An independent assessment shows they are not safe to operate beyond 2030.”

Indeed, what a relief to those communities that, finally, the Secretary of State has come forward to confirm that they will at least be built. I hope that will be done at speed so that we can make sure that at least one group of hospitals is built by 2030.

Turning to his wider promise, I genuinely expected that the Secretary of State might come to the House today and be upfront about the fact that, whatever promises the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), made in 2019, the pledge to build 40 new hospitals by 2030 will simply not happen. It was a straightforward commitment—40 new hospitals—but since it was made we have become familiar with the idea that they were not new and, astonishingly, they were not even new hospitals. In fact, since that general election we have had more new Health Secretaries than we have had new hospitals. Indeed, we have a case in point—like the new hospitals, some of them are not even new.

In August 2021 we discovered the Government's definition of a “new” hospital when a departmental memo on key media lines to use when talking about the programme advised that fix-ups and paint jobs should be included. Then in November of that same year, the Government's own infrastructure watchdog called the programme “unachievable.” So what has changed? In February this year it was revealed that only 10 of the projects even had planning permission. Just last week the BBC reported that the building work is yet to start on 33 of the 40 projects promised. In fact, most are still waiting to hear what their final budget will be, and none of the six that were supposed to be ready for 2025 has full planning permission or funding yet.

This matters, because people in those places were made a promise. The Secretary of State has the audacity to repeat that promise today when—even if the will is there and, as he says, the money is there—it is hard to

see or understand how, practically, he will be able to deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030. Will he now come clean and admit that this is just another example of the Conservatives over-promising and under-delivering? The fact is that, thanks to the dither and delay and the churn of personnel from one Health Secretary to another and one Prime Minister to another, the programme has been hit with delays and uncertainty for years. As a result, the costs have soared, and it is less likely that the hospitals will ever be built, letting down taxpayers and letting down patients.

The Secretary of State has also tried to instil this sense of jeopardy that, if there were a change of Government and they were a Labour Government, hospital building would somehow become less likely. He quoted the Leader of the Opposition accurately, but he did not seem to understand the meaning. It is quite right to say that, before we commit any more money to capital projects, we will want to make sure that these projects are feasible, are good value for money and will deliver the improvement that patients need.

However, if I have understood the Secretary of State's statement correctly, the hospitals that he has announced are all fully funded. I cannot wait to see the detail behind “fully funded”, but surely if we are accepting him at face value and these are fully funded, there will not be the need for any more money from a Labour Government to fund these 40 new hospitals. Therefore, there is no risk or jeopardy at all, assuming that the money is there and the case stacks up. That is why we requested a National Audit Office investigation into the programme and why we will set up an office of value for money to make sure that we get value for every penny of taxpayers' money spent.

The Conservatives have dithered so much that it has been reported that the programme is now expected to cost twice as much as originally estimated—an eye-watering £35 billion. Does the Health Secretary recognise that figure? If he does not, will he commit to publishing the latest estimate that his Department has made of the true cost of the programme? If it is fully funded, can he explain exactly where that money has come from?

This is not just about cost, but about the very real threat to patient safety, which this irresponsible Government are presiding over day in, day out. In December, the Health Secretary acknowledged the enormous concerns about reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete used in certain hospitals, and the safety implications of this. He committed to eradicating it from the NHS estate. Why has it taken him six months to get to this point? I wonder how many of the new hospitals have been kicked into the long grass, beyond 2030, as a result of the decision that his Department has made today.

In conclusion, is it not time for the Health Secretary to come clean with the House and with the public and admit that the only place that these 40 “new” hospitals will exist by 2030 is in the former Prime Minister's imagination? In fact, what we have heard today is a plan on paper, but it is one that will never see reality in practice.

**Steve Barclay:** It is a very strange approach to complain about Members coming to the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman almost sinks his own point with his opening gambit. We are here because of the campaigning of Conservative Members for new hospitals. That is why, when they see that there is a statement on new hospitals as part of that campaign, it is no surprise that they are

[*Steve Barclay*]

in the Chamber. It is pretty odd to complain about Members coming to the Chamber because they are interested in what is happening in their own constituencies.

It is equally strange for the Opposition to appear to be complaining about a plan that they have been calling for over recent weeks. The shadow Secretary of State has repeatedly said that he wants to see the new hospitals programme plan. We have set that out in the statement today, to which he says he is concerned that we only have a plan. A plan on the Government side beats no plan on the Opposition side.

The hon. Gentleman also seems, slightly oddly, not to welcome a commitment to over £20 billion of investment in the NHS estate. He seems to have an objection to me giving a commitment to address the issues of RAAC hospitals, which NHS leaders themselves have said should be prioritised and which independent reports have said create a risk beyond 2030, and coming to the Chamber after discussions with Treasury colleagues and others across Government to confirm that we now have funding to address the seven RAAC hospitals that he has called for action on.

The shadow Secretary of State then seems to have an objection about speed, yet the whole thrust of my statement was about how we are changing our methodology through the use of modern methods of construction, learning from what has been done in the education sector, the justice sector and the private sector about delivering construction schemes at pace. That gives more confidence on cost; it stops local chief executives changing the specifications once designs are under way; it allows things to be built more quickly; it allows us to benefit from technology, with construction in factories as opposed to more conventional construction; and it allows us to deliver schemes more quickly.

It is for that reason that Conservative Members campaigned so strongly for it, none more so than my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has been an assiduous champion of the case for Airedale General Hospital. As the statement sets out, we are committed to addressing the RAAC hospitals, and fixing them has in turn unblocked something that was causing delay to the programme for the enabling works for cohort 3, in particular.

Cohort 2, where schemes are well advanced, will also now be able to proceed. We also updated the House on the more bespoke approach being taken to some of cohort 4. The shadow Secretary of State is right to talk about a sense of jeopardy, because those on the Opposition Front Bench have said they want to pause, review and stop the schemes we will be proceeding with. That is the real risk to the new hospitals programme. We have a new approach. We have a clear plan. It is the Labour party that wants to stop it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): I am grateful for the statement; the Select Committee will want to have a good look at it, and we will start when the Secretary of State comes to see us next month. At the last election, I promised my constituents significant investment in Winchester Hospital. That is already happening, and

now with early work in cohort 4 we have the promise of the elective hub to scale the orthopaedic list. Can the Secretary of State be clear with my constituents that, as the new Hampshire hospital comes together as part of the wider cohort 4, it will be for clinicians to make the clinical case on what safe and sustainable services look like in the long term for those people?

**Steve Barclay:** There are different issues around construction and service design. In terms of service design, there will need to be discussions with local clinicians and others. As my hon. Friend knows, with his scheme in North and Mid Hampshire, there are issues around the new site for junction 7 of the M3, where there is significant work on potential land acquisition and what upgrading of the motorway would be required. There is a question about the size of the hospital versus other services offered locally. Those are the issues we are keen to get in discussion with the North and Mid Hampshire trusts on, and that will be part of the rolling programme we take forward.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): On the Leeds project, I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State, but can I press him on the detail? How much money is going to be allocated to the Leeds project? Will the standardised approach that he has talked about have any flexibility within it, given the particular characteristics of the Leeds site, which he knows about, and the fact that, as he is also aware, it is cleared and ready to go?

**Steve Barclay:** For reasons of commercial confidentiality, which I am sure the House will recognise, it would be unwise to say what each scheme is allocated—that would be most interesting to the developers bidding for that work. That is why we will not set out individual allocations. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I have been to see Leeds and I recognise the importance of the work there. On the modular design 2.0, I pay tribute to the work that Lord Markham has done; he brings real commercial experience into the use of modular methods of construction. Those schemes are designed to have some flex. I sat for four years on the Public Accounts Committee, and one of the recurring themes during my time there was costs increasing because specifications were changed mid-build. One of the advantages of the modular method of construction is that, by putting all the advice into the design at the front end, we can standardise design, have the benefits of scale and maximise the “national” in National Health Service, rather than having individual schemes, all of them at risk of specifications changing and costs inflating.

**Elizabeth Truss** (South West Norfolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary for listening to our representations in west Norfolk and announcing a new build for the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. As he knows, the hospital is in a poor state. Parts of it are being held up by stilts and the concrete is crumbling. This announcement will come as a huge relief to local residents and will be extremely welcome. Can he confirm that the new hospital will open its doors by 2030?

**Steve Barclay:** I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her campaigning on this issue, together with other Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for

Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who have also led that campaign. I can confirm that the new hospital will open by 2030. We accept in full the findings of the independent report. That is why the seven RAAC hospitals are being prioritised and why today's announcement is such great news for staff and patients in King's Lynn.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): The Imperial College Healthcare NHS trust, including St Mary's Hospital Paddington, has the largest maintenance backlog in the country. We have had floods, fires, sewage leaks and collapsed ceilings. I noticed that St Mary's Hospital was not mentioned in the course of the statement. Can the Secretary of State confirm to me that it will be completed as one of the 40 hospitals by 2030?

**Steve Barclay:** St Mary's is part of three aspects of the Imperial NHS trust: there is the work at Charing Cross in Hammersmith, where we are building the temporary ward to unblock the refurbishment, which will be floor by floor, and the work in Hammersmith with the cardiac—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) may want to chunter, but I am trying to explain the investment we are placing into the constituencies, so we have funding going into—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have asked the hon. Gentleman politely to stop shouting. I hope he will do so.

**Steve Barclay:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We recognise the importance of the Imperial bid; that is why we are starting to build the temporary ward capacity at Charing Cross and the first phase of work is under way on the cardiac elective recovery hub, to bring cardiac work on to the Hammersmith site.<sup>1</sup> On St Mary's Hospital, we have already put in some initial funding to explore the new site with Transport for London and Network Rail. That will go into the rolling programme, of which St Mary's will be part, alongside the redesign that is needed, taking on board the changes at Charing Cross and Hammersmith.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I unreservedly welcome this announcement for my Whipp's Cross University Hospital, for my constituents and all the other residents. I know secretly, in his heart, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) rejoices with me—I want to out him on that point. He stood on the line with me when we tried to stop the last Labour Government closing that hospital, so together we will rejoice over this. I know he will; he is a decent chap. I simply say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that for 30 years I have campaigned for the hospital to be rebuilt. To build it now will be a fantastic delivery for our constituents. I have badgered him about it, as I have badgered his predecessors—who also include him—as Secretary of State down the past 30 years. Can he please answer one simple question? Will the work start physically, shovels in the ground, on this hospital in the autumn of this year?

**Steve Barclay:** Yes, we expect enabling works to start at Whipp's Cross. I have been to the site with my right hon. Friend. We have seen the urgency of it. As he said,

1.[*Official Report*, 5 June 2023, Vol. 733, c. 8MC.]

he has campaigned vigorously on this and championed it throughout. We are very keen, now that we have unblocked the issue around the RAAC hospitals, to start the enabling works on the cohort 3 sites as soon as possible. Obviously, we will, now that we have clarity, discuss with trusts the precise timetable, but the funding for the enabling works to progress will now be available, and we will work with the trust to take that forward.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): In what way is delaying work on Charing Cross and Hammersmith Hospitals speeding things up? This is the most shameful, self-serving and nakedly political statement I think I have ever heard. We have heard that Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust has the biggest backlog in the country. The Government tried for eight years to demolish Charing Cross Hospital, and now they are promising a portacabin there. The only thing that gives me comfort is that the Secretary of State and the whole rotten lot of them will be out of here in a year's time, and we will have a Labour Government who will actually deliver for Imperial, for Charing Cross, for Hammersmith and for my constituents.

**Steve Barclay:** At pretty much every election the hon. Gentleman has stood for, he has said that all the local hospitals will be closed by a Conservative Government, so it is good to have him championing the redesign and refurbishment of those hospitals. What really undermined his question was the question from his colleague, the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). The whole point is that we need to look at the interaction between Charing Cross, Hammersmith and St Mary's Hospitals—the design of services needs to be looked at across the Imperial trust as a collective. Vis-à-vis a potential new site at St Mary's, there are questions relating to Transport for London and Network Rail. On Charing Cross, we need to create temporary ward capacity in order then to unblock the refurbishments, which we will do floor by floor. It is a very tightly constrained site and it needs a bespoke approach. That is what we are setting out. Where schemes can follow a standardised design, we will have a modular 2.0 approach, but some schemes that need refurbishment have particular site issues, and we will work through them in a more bespoke way.

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): This is marvellous news across the country, but I would like to ask the Secretary of State about the decision on Lancaster. I have heard that we may gain a new hospital further down the line—we are in need of one. Any news he could give us would be fantastic not just for me, after all my lobbying of him and his predecessors—much like my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—but for the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who is my hon. Friend in this context.

**Steve Barclay:** It is not just the Eden Project North on which my hon. Friend has been a vigorous campaigner: he has raised this assiduously as well. As he knows, the trust is at a very early stage in its consideration of what public consultation will be needed around the reconfiguration of services across Lancaster. We are not letting that stop our work to open a new surgical hub at the Royal Preston Hospital, for example.<sup>1</sup> As he knows, I know the geography very well in terms of the interaction

1.[*Official Report*, 5 June 2023, Vol. 733, c. 8MC.]

[*Steve Barclay*]

with Lancaster. There are a number of options on consolidation and expanding to two sites. I look forward to discussions with him as we take that forward.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): Having asked the Government 14 times to release funding to West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust and other hospital trusts, I am relieved that they now have approval to proceed, but the Secretary of State will know, as the rest of us do, that the construction industry thinks that the 2030 date is pie in the sky. The Government have not been looking after our hospitals, so we have lost huge parts of the workforce and of our supply chains. *Building* magazine says that the contract notice for a delivery partner will not even be published until September. Of course, as I understand it, none of the major construction companies has even started to put together project teams to bid for the work. For all the talk of 2030, could the Secretary of State tell us how much progress he is prepared to promise before the next general election?

**Steve Barclay:** The announcement and the manifesto commitment were to build by 2030. The hon. Lady touches on the engagement with industry; Lord Markham has been engaging with industry. We have had a significant team, both within the Department and in NHS England, working on the standardised designs. The whole point is that we have seen in other sectors how standardisation allows us to construct much more quickly. It will also allow internal processes in government to be much quicker because we are not looking at each scheme in a bespoke way; we will have much more standardisation. That is how we will move at a much quicker pace. It has required us to take a little more time over recent months as we have finalised the plan, but now that we have that plan and clarity about the RAAC hospitals in particular, we will be able to move with much more pace.

**Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the confirmation that the new Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust hospital in Basingstoke is one of the cohort 4 hospitals due for completion in 2032-33. It will serve residents in my constituency and those of a number of right hon. and hon. Members. We have a plan, a preferred site and an amazing team on the ground, so how can my right hon. Friend work with me and other colleagues to speed up this new hospital? It is badly needed to replace the current hospital, which was built in the 1970s to last 50 years. We have one of the biggest maintenance backlogs, and we really need the new hospital to meet the needs of our growing population. We have some of the highest levels of house building in the south-east. What can he do to help?

**Steve Barclay:** My right hon. Friend has assiduously and passionately led the campaign on this. I stand ready to have further discussions with her. She is right about the trust going into the rolling programme; that is how it will be taken forward. As I touched on in response to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), there are some questions that we are keen to work through—not least around junction 7, the land acquisition, and the service design—and I know that she will be at the fore in making representations on those points.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State clarify the position on North Manchester General Hospital? It is not mentioned in the written copy of his statement and I did not hear him mention it. When the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) announced the original building scheme, North Manchester General Hospital was a top six—if not the top—hospital. Its problems are not mid-20th century concrete; they are mid-19th century buildings that need replacing with modern buildings. I thank the Secretary of State for emailing me in the middle of his speech—it was very clever; I got the email when he was on his feet—to say that initial works and progress can start. That has happened—grounds are being cleared, a car park is under construction and a new mental health unit is being built on that site—but the final clearance for what was a half-billion pound scheme has not been given. The trust has told me in correspondence that it cannot get clearance. Will he give the final go-ahead now, and will he return to north Manchester and visit the hospital? I know that he has been before.

**Steve Barclay:** I have been before, as the hon. Gentleman knows, not least because I was an unsuccessful candidate in 1997, when he was elected to the House. I am very happy to ensure that a note comes with any further clarification—I will take that away and pick it up with the Department. I know that enabling works commenced in 2022. There have been extensive demolition works, which have continued into 2023. There is, as he is well aware, the key dependency for the Park House mental health project, which also needs to be factored in. The multi-storey car park is under construction, so that work is already under way. I hope that he can see the clarity that the statement will bring to the conversations that we can now have with trusts on enabling works and the next steps, but I am happy to get a more detailed note to him following the statement.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) in particular, as well as you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the Member for Epping Forest, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), have led a showcase, turbocharged campaign for a new Princess Alexandra Hospital for Harlow in Essex. Any services in Essex benefit the whole of Essex. I also thank the Secretary of State for the £8 million invested in Southend University Hospital for a new, reconfigured A&E; plans are progressing very well. Does this multimillion-pound investment not show that we have a Government who are committed to improving healthcare for everyone across our brilliant county?

**Steve Barclay:** I very much agree. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the £8 million investment in Southend and the wider capital programme, not least the roll-out of diagnostic centres and new surgical hubs, which are all part of us tackling the pandemic backlog and of our commitment to investing in the NHS estate.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I place on record my deep sadness at the passing of Karen Lumley today? She was a dear friend, as well as a valued colleague, and she will be very much missed.

I thank my right hon. Friend for the confirmation of funding for the new women and maternity unit at Milton Keynes University Hospital. Can he give me an assurance that he will work with Joe Harrison, the excellent chief executive, and his team to bring forward as many enabling works as possible? The site is ready to be developed almost immediately.

**Steve Barclay:** I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I have frequent meetings with the chief exec of Milton Keynes University Hospital, not least because he provides national leadership in our development of the NHS app. I know that he champions the Milton Keynes site and its next steps, and I am keen to continue to work constructively with him.

**Dean Russell (Watford) (Con):** I am overjoyed at this statement. I was grateful that my right hon. Friend took up my invitation earlier this year to visit Watford General Hospital. My hope at that time was to make the argument in person, at the hospital, for why it was so important that we had the new build, and he listened. This announcement is beyond my expectations. The words “fully funded” mean so much to my constituents across Watford and West Herts. It means a state-of-the-art, fully funded, world-class hospital, and it is the result of years of tireless campaigning by both myself and my predecessor. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has also said that he is supportive, which is fantastic news.

As well as accepting my heartfelt thanks for listening to all my pleas, arguments, pitching and probably annoying conversations about this, will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the leadership team at West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust for all their hard work and planning to make this a possibility today? Does he agree that the new hospital will not only transform healthcare for the entire area of Watford and West Herts but create a cutting-edge, 21st-century workplace for our fantastic staff and volunteers across the area?

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend has not only championed Watford General Hospital; he has worked there as a volunteer on many occasions. He has been compelling in the representations he made to Ministers across Government on the case for investment in Watford. It is a huge tribute to him, and as he says, it is also a tribute to the wider leadership team in Watford. He is right that it will have a transformative effect, and I have seen at first hand, with him, the urgent case for investment in Watford that he has championed.

**Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** I very much welcome this statement, especially the commitment to Milton Keynes University Hospital. It is a key hospital that serves my constituents, alongside Stoke Mandeville Hospital, which also enjoys a new paediatric A&E, John Radcliffe Hospital and Wycombe Hospital. The case of Wycombe shows that it is not just reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete that trusts are grappling with; the tower at Wycombe needs at least £80 million in maintenance and repairs, or preferably, as the trust plans, a full decant, with a £200 million purpose-built planned care centre. That will take national spending. What hope can my right hon. Friend offer Buckinghamshire patients that Wycombe's plans can become a reality?

**Steve Barclay:** As I touched on a moment ago, there are a range of initiatives across the NHS estate. The leadership team from the Getting It Right First Time programme, including Professor Tim Briggs, recently visited Wycombe to discuss proposals with the senior clinical team, and we look forward to working constructively with the local integrated care system as it designs the right fit for Wycombe and the wider system.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for his personal interest in and commitment to Kettering General Hospital and his visit to the hospital last July. Will he confirm that Kettering General Hospital's place in the new hospital programme continues to be secured with a fully funded, redeveloped, improved and expanded hospital due on the existing site by 2030, in line with the original timeline?

**Steve Barclay:** As I set out in my statement, the place of Kettering in the new hospital programme is secure. That is in large part a result of my hon. Friend's campaigning. He has raised this issue with me on a very regular basis and shown me at first hand the issues at Kettering. He has championed investment in Kettering General Hospital, and today's announcement is a very positive day for the staff and patients of Kettering.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** On behalf of my constituents, particularly in Middlewich and Sandbach, I warmly welcome the excellent news on the rebuild of Leighton Hospital. I thank Ministers for responding to the determined local campaigning on this, commendably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) and also involving my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). Without wanting to detract from that, could I again ask the Secretary of State to look at Congleton War Memorial Hospital? Will he meet me to discuss how the services and facilities there can be expanded and modernised? There is capacity for the site to serve the residents of Congleton, where demand is increasing, as house building has increased in the area.

**Steve Barclay:** I know that my hon. Friend has championed this investment in her health system. She is right that it serves a number of constituencies and is part of the wider system transformation that I set out, with other investments such as in diagnostic centres and surgical hubs. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who leads on primary care, has been looking at the specific issue of new housing and how we can get the right level of contribution from new housing to local health facilities. I know that he will be happy to discuss that with her.

**James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con):** It is fantastic news that the Queen Elizabeth Hospital is one of the new hospitals that this Government are committed to building, and I am delighted that the case I have been making with very strong local support has been accepted. On behalf of my constituents and everyone at Team QEH, may I offer huge thanks to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary for the determination he has shown to resolve the RAAC safety issues? Will he confirm that this is a fully funded plan, so that there will be a fit-for-the-future hospital in King's Lynn by 2030?

**Steve Barclay:** I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done to champion the case for King's Lynn. He has raised this issue with me and the ministerial team on a very regular basis, and he has been compelling. I am happy to confirm, as set out in the statement, that this will enable King's Lynn to be rebuilt, and that is fully funded.

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): I welcome today's statement. I have been working with the Royal Berkshire Hospital on the Building Berkshire Together community engagement programme, and there is palpable enthusiasm in my constituency that we are going to have a new, state-of-the-art hospital on our doorstep. But, as my right hon. Friend said in his statement, we are in cohort 4, and there are issues with this site. Can he give us a guarantee that there will be a rebuild at the Royal Berks, and could he set out the next steps, so that I can reassure my constituents as to what lies ahead?

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend is right on both counts—first, that the Royal Berkshire is part of the rolling new hospital programme, and secondly, that there are complexities with that site. As she knows, part of the site is grade I listed, and there have been some specific issues with the existing site on which survey work has been undertaken. That is having an impact on the target date for work. We are funding a mental health crisis facility this year, along with the survey work, and I look forward to having further discussions with her as that progresses.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): This announcement could not be better news for the people of Broadland. In the west of my constituency, they are going to be served by a brand new build at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, and a brand new hospital at the James Paget will be serving constituents at the other end of my constituency, joining the work of the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital in the centre. Can my right hon. Friend just confirm that the modular nature of the design will still provide the absolutely first-class facilities that the people of Norfolk deserve?

**Steve Barclay:** Today's announcement is transformative for healthcare in Norfolk, for the reasons my hon. Friend has set out: a new hospital at the James Paget and a new hospital in King's Lynn. Of course, there will be further work from Government on the diagnostic centres and surgical hubs, about which there will be further discussion. In terms of the quality of the modular design, we are bringing the country's leading experts together, as well as engaging with the market to finalise those designs so that we can have the best inputs as we standardise the design, and then roll that out as the template for schemes at King's Lynn and James Paget. The quality of the scheme should be of a very high order.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): After three and a half years of tireless campaigning—of constant lobbying of the Government, raising the high structural risk profile of Airedale hospital due to its aerated concrete construction—I am delighted to hear today's announcement from the Dispatch Box that we will be getting a new Airedale hospital that is going to be fit for the future. I put on record my thanks to the Airedale NHS Foundation Trust for its hard work and to my neighbouring Members

in this place, as well as to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Health Secretary for listening to our concerns and taking them on board. Can my right hon. Friend come and visit the great team at Airedale hospital, and will he give reassurance to me that our new Airedale hospital will be built and open by 2030?

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend has campaigned assiduously over the past three years to make a compelling case for Airedale. I very much look forward to having the opportunity to visit in due course, and the commitment in today's statement is to ensure that that hospital is built to the 2030 timescale.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): Given the Secretary of State's answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), could I press him a little further for some clarity on the replacement for Basingstoke hospital? Could he confirm that it is agreed that a replacement is needed for the hospital; that the money is in the budget to do so; and that, notwithstanding the complexities regarding the site that he outlined in his previous answers, a site will be found and a new hospital will be open in the early 2030s to serve all of our constituents?

**Steve Barclay:** On the issues that my right hon. Friend raises, it is agreed that a replacement is needed and that North and Mid Hampshire will go into the rolling programme for the new hospital programme. As a result, a site will be found, and the intention is to work to a 2032-33 timescale—that is the plan. The original timescale was already stretched because of some of the complexity involved, and I have also signalled just how long previous designs for hospitals have taken, so we are speeding up the construction side but we also need to address some of the issues, particularly around junction 7 and the site design.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I very warmly welcome this announcement and pay tribute to the leadership of Leighton Hospital, who have relentlessly advocated for this. It has been a three-year, team-effort campaign, particularly with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and others. I thank the thousands of residents who signed the petition backing this campaign, and I know the team will be itching to get started. Could my right hon. Friend perhaps outline what the next steps will be for Leighton and the other sites?

**Steve Barclay:** Again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's campaigning work, as well as the work he did in his local hospital as a volunteer during lockdown, which was extremely well received. It is why he has campaigned—along with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton—to make the case for this investment. I am very happy to have further discussions with him as liaison with the trust on the next steps moves forward.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am sure the Health Secretary has become absolutely sick of the sight of me campaigning for Milton Keynes' new women's and children's hospital, both in his current role and his

previous role at the Treasury. In the event that he is not sick of the sight of me, would he like to come up to Milton Keynes and look at the site, and where we can keep our foot on the pedal and get some enabling works going? We are going to hit that 2030 target, but there is no reason why we cannot get cracking and get started straightaway.

**Steve Barclay:** It is always a pleasure to see my hon. Friend whatever the issue, but he is right that he has assiduously raised the case for Milton Keynes, as has his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart)—they worked very effectively as a team to make that case. I look forward to having further discussions with him as we take the plans forward.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Mr Fletcher.

**Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—he who is first will be last, and he who is last will one day be first.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and I congratulate all Members who have been successful with their bids for new hospitals. Sadly, there is one name missing from the announcement: Doncaster. Although I understand that the RAAC hospital replacements are desperately needed, and I know that many of my constituents will benefit from the new A&E department in Bassetlaw, that does not remove the need for Doncaster to have a new hospital. There is a brownfield site right in the centre of Doncaster that is shovel-ready and ready to go, so will the Secretary of State—as well as maybe the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up—meet me to see what we can do to get Doncaster a new hospital? It would not just be a new hospital: it would revitalise the city of Doncaster, and we really need this.

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend is right to champion the case of Doncaster. As he knows, while it is not in his constituency, the investment we are making in Bassetlaw is for patient care that, in a number of instances, will directly serve his constituents in Doncaster. That is why it is right that we look at capital investment on a system-wide basis, and I am very happy to have further discussions with him in conjunction with his local integrated care system as to that ICS's future plans regarding its capital investment.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for responding to questions for exactly one hour. Iain Stewart mentioned the passing of Karen Lumley as well; she was a personal friend of mine. She was a wonderful person and a great Member of Parliament, and my deepest condolences go to Richard and the entire family. We will miss her.

## Animal Welfare

2.17 pm

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will provide the House with an update on the Government's progress on animal welfare. Before I start, would you indulge me in allowing me to pay tribute to Peter Jinman, who was chairman of the Farm Animal Welfare Committee and also heavily involved with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, who I understand passed away last night? He was a great man and a friend of mine, and did an enormous amount of work in the area of animal welfare.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and animal welfare has been a priority of the Government since 2010. Since then, on farms, we have introduced new regulations for minimum standards for meat chickens, banned the use of conventional battery cages for laying hens, and made CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses in England. For pets, we have introduced microchipping, which became mandatory for dogs in 2015; we have modernised our licensing system for activities such as dog breeding and pet sales; we have protected service animals via Finn's law; and we have banned commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens. In 2019, our Wild Animals in Circuses Act became law, and we have also led work to implement humane trapping standards by banning glue traps. We have done more than any other party on animal welfare, delivering on a manifesto that was drafted with the public's priorities in mind.

Further to the steps I have outlined, in 2021, we published an ambitious and comprehensive action plan for animal welfare that set out an array of future reforms for this Parliament and beyond. That action plan's wide-ranging measures relate to farmed animals, wild animals, pets and sporting animals. They include legislative and non-legislative reforms, and extend beyond domestic actions to cover international engagement and advocacy. And we have delivered—since the publication of that action plan, we have delivered on four key manifesto commitments. First, we passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, which recognises in law that all vertebrate animals and invertebrates such as crabs, lobsters and octopuses are sentient beings. That Act will form the bedrock of the animal welfare policy of the future. We passed the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, which introduced tougher sentences for animal cruelty, increasing maximum sentences from six months up to five years. Last month, we made cat microchipping compulsory, which will help reunite lost pets with their owners. Just this week, we announced that, having brought the Ivory Act 2018 into force in 2022, we will be extending it to cover five endangered species: hippopotamus, narwhal, killer whale, sperm whale and walrus.

In addition to legislating, we have launched the pioneering animal health and welfare pathway. It charts the route forward for improved farm animal welfare for years to come. This Government and industry partnership are already transforming welfare on the ground. The pathway does that through annual health and welfare reviews with a vet of choice, supported by financial grants.

I can tell that Opposition Members are feeling weary listening to the expansive list of delivery, but I can assure them that I am not done yet, because today we are taking two further steps in delivering our action

[Mark Spencer]

plan. First, we are announcing the launch of the new Animal Sentience Committee, which will advise Government on how policy decisions should take account of animal welfare. The committee's membership provides expertise from veterinary and social science and covers farm, companion and wild animals. We expect the committee to begin its work next month.

Secondly, we are announcing a consultation on new financial penalties of up to £5,000 for those who commit offences against animals. That will mean there is a new enforcement tool to use against the small minority of people who fail to protect the health and welfare of animals. This could apply, for example, if an animal is kept in poor living conditions due to a lack of appropriate bedding or shelter.

On top of those measures, we continue to support the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), which will implement our manifesto commitment to ban the import of hunting trophies. Also making strong progress are private Members' Bills that ban the import and export of detached shark fins and that ban the advertising and offering for sale here of low-welfare animal activities abroad. I thank the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) and my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) respectively.

The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill started nearly two years ago. It was designed to implement several of our ambitions, including banning the live exports of animals, seeking to prevent pet theft and new measures to tackle livestock worrying. Unfortunately, its multi-issue nature means there has been considerable scope-creep. The Bill risks being extended far beyond the original commitments in the manifesto and the action plan. In particular, Labour is clearly determined to play political games by widening the Bill's scope.

The Bills and regulations that we have already passed demonstrate the enormous progress that can be made with single-issue legislation, so we will be taking forward measures from the kept animals Bill individually during the remainder of this Parliament. We remain fully committed to delivering our manifesto commitments, and this approach is the surest and quickest way of doing so, rather than letting that Bill be mired in political game-playing. Having left the EU, we are able to and will ban live exports for fattening and slaughter. There have been no live exports from Great Britain since 2020, but our legislation will ensure that that becomes permanent and we remain committed to delivering it.

We are committed to clamping down on puppy smuggling. We will ban the import of young, heavily pregnant or mutilated dogs, and we will be able to do that more quickly with a single-issue Bill than with the secondary legislation required under the kept animals Bill. We are committed to banning the keeping of primates as pets, and we will do that by consulting before the summer recess on primate-keeping standards. They will be applied by secondary legislation to be brought forward this year. We also look forward to progressing delivery of the new offence of pet abduction and new measures to tackle livestock worrying.

I am conscious that there are many other campaigns on aspects of animal welfare. I want to assure the House that, in making this change to how we will implement

the measures outlined, we are open to future consideration, but we will focus on delivering these key elements. Delivering these measures, as well as everything we have already delivered as part of and beyond the animal welfare elements of our manifesto, shows a Government who care about animals and do not just talk about the issue or play games with it. We are committed to maintaining our strong track record on animal welfare and to delivering continued improvements in this Parliament and beyond. I commend this statement to the House.

2.24 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We were here just a few hours ago, at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs oral questions. When the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) asked when the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill would return, the Secretary of State said all was well. She said:

"I have spoken with the business managers and expect an announcement on the progress of the Bill very soon."

All the while, DEFRA Ministers were plotting the extinction of that very Bill. The Secretary of State trotted out the same thin gruel on rural animal welfare that we have just heard from the Minister. She named only four ways they had improved animal welfare in 13 years—not even one for each Conservative Prime Minister, although I recognise that the Minister tried a bit harder just now.

The political decision taken by the Government today represents a profound setback for animal welfare in the UK. It confirms, once again, that they are too weak to deliver their own legislation. This time, it is innocent animals that will suffer the consequences. Three Environment Secretaries ago, we were promised:

"The Kept Animals Bill will bring in some of the world's highest and strongest protections for pets, livestock and kept wild animals."

It was supposed to be a Bill packed with ambitious reforms. It promised to close loopholes such as the one that allows the sale of dogs with unnecessary mutilations. It would have ended the cruel practices of exporting live animals for slaughter, keeping primates as pets and puppy smuggling. Despite public outcry and the best efforts of animal welfare organisations, the Government have chosen to break their promise and scrap the Bill they so enthusiastically presented to us two years ago.

The Minister said:

"Labour is clearly determined to play political games by widening the Bill's scope."

The only people playing political games here are the Government. Attempting to use the fact that my party is stronger on animal welfare to justify the decision to scrap that Bill is a strange thing to do. I am proud that Labour is the party of animal welfare, although if the Minister is so convinced I am running the agenda on animal welfare, perhaps we should swap places. Perhaps he should also take a look over his shoulder, because we know how many of his colleagues behind him on the Government Benches want this legislation and our reasonable and necessary measures to strengthen it. If every Department chose his approach, the Government would have to scrap every Bill. Oppositions are here to oppose. If the Government cannot handle basic scrutiny, it calls into question their ability to govern at all.

The last time the Bill came before the House was October 2021—three Prime Ministers ago. Why has it taken the Minister so long to come to this decision?

As with the Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Bill—another world-leading piece of animal welfare legislation scrapped by the Government—the Minister promises that the Government's commitments can be delivered more efficiently via single-issue Bills. It is interesting to note then that they still have not banned the import of fur and foie gras, as promised in that Bill.

This morning in DEFRA orals, the Secretary of State gave a strong assurance that the import of pregnant dogs and dogs with mutilations such as cropped ears will be banned. Will the Minister provide a timeline for the proposed single-issue legislation for all the promises made in the kept animals Bill? I would be particularly interested to hear a date for the legislation to ban imports of young, heavily pregnant or mutilated dogs, as was so clearly promised just four hours ago.

Earlier this week, the Dogs Trust, supported by more than 50,000 people, appealed to the Prime Minister directly, urging the Government to pass the Bill. It and numerous other organisations have campaigned tirelessly for the reforms that the Bill was intended to introduce, and I put on record my gratitude for their unrelenting work. It is not just animal welfare groups that are passionate about this issue; Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and we would be hard-pressed to find a Member who does not receive multiple emails, letters and phone calls every day on these issues.

This statement is not what the public want, it is not what our dedicated animal welfare charities want and it is not what the Labour party wants, so why will the Government not listen? Is it that Ministers lack the courage to act in the face of internal party opposition, or have they lost control of their own Back Benchers? It is maddening to watch as, time and again, this Government make cruel and callous decisions with no regard for their real-life impact. Although not surprising, today's announcement is a huge step backwards for animal welfare and a blatant dismissal of public trust and expectation. The Tories are not committed to animal welfare; they are committed to self-preservation, and they are taking increasingly reprehensible measures as a result. Is it really too much to ask to live in a country where issues such as the welfare of our animals are put above the interests of a party desperately clinging on to power?

Make no mistake: Labour is the party of animal welfare. From ending the testing of cosmetics on animals and banning fox hunting to tightening the rules on the transport of live animals, my party has always led the way when it comes to protecting animals. The Government cannot get away with this. It is time for them to be held accountable for their constant dereliction of duty and contempt for the people that entrusted them to lead. If they cannot meet the challenges before them, they should step aside and let a party that can.

**Mark Spencer:** I think that was a demonstration of the games the hon. Member seeks to play and would like to play, but while he plays his political games, we are getting on with delivering for animals. I can reread the list of all the things we have delivered, and even he had to acknowledge that it is an extensive list.

We have committed ourselves to delivering the measures in the kept animals Bill, and we will deliver them. Live exports are a very good example. Not a single live animal has been exported since we left the European Union.

We will close that loophole and make sure we deliver. We continue to be committed to delivering on puppy smuggling. There will be a statutory instrument this year on keeping primates as pets. That was a manifesto commitment, and we will deliver on it very soon. Pet abduction is a very good example of where we can go further. In the kept animals Bill, we said we would protect dogs from abduction, and by approaching this in the way we propose today, we can include cats in that measure to protect them too. We are already making reforms to the Zoo Licensing Act 1981. We are engaging with the zoo sector to make sure that we can capitalise on the progress we have already made to ensure we deliver for those animals.

We are very proud of our record on animal welfare. We continue to be committed in this area, and we will deliver before the next general election.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I have campaigned for more than two decades for an end to the live export of animals for slaughter, so I have to say I do feel a sense of frustration and disappointment that the kept animals Bill is not going to come back to Parliament. I really appeal to the Minister and the wider Government to bring us a new Bill. Let us get on with this, and let us ban this cruel trade.

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question, and I pay tribute to her dedication in this area. As I said earlier, the good news is that not a single live animal has been exported during the time she spoke about. That gives us a window of opportunity to introduce this legislation, and to make sure that the practice is not reintroduced at any point in the future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am grateful for advance sight of the statement, and I do not dispute any of the actions referred to by the Minister. We always welcome any positive progress on animal welfare measures, but that is not entirely the point. We are evidently here to listen to a rolling back. Let us not kid ourselves that this is anything apart from that. There was a commitment to a kept animals Bill, but it has now been dropped like a stone, and on the afternoon of the last day before recess. We cannot be expected to be content to progress in that way. How can we believe the UK Government on animal welfare measures if that is how they behave? I am afraid the suggestion that this is happening because of some kind of scope-creep caused by Opposition Members stands up to no scrutiny at all.

I can see why it may suit the Government to say that, rather than pursuing the kept animals Bill, they will deal with individual issues. Of course, that is the same trick they did with the employment Bill. What that meant in reality was a lowering of standards, a cherry-picking of commitments to suit their own Back Benchers and an entirely unsatisfactory situation. We have the same worries here. I am very concerned about the evident lack of will from the UK Government to act decisively to ban foie gras, for instance, despite the unforgivably cruel way in which it is produced. Why on earth will they not commit to that? They seem to be missing in action, as far as I can see, on fur. I would certainly welcome a ramping-up of progress on puppy and kitten

[Kirsten Oswald]

smuggling. When will that happen? I would like to hear from the Minister on all those issues and to know when we can expect to see action.

While the UK Government have been shilly-shallying on all these issues, the Scottish Government have pushed ahead with the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, which closes loopholes that had permitted illegal hunters to use trail hunts as a fig leaf for their crimes. I ask the Minister, will the UK Government follow the Scottish Government's example and ban the loopholes that have permitted English and Welsh hunters to continue their illegal and immoral blood sports?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, but also for her acknowledgement of the huge amount of progress we have already made. [Interruption.] Well, she acknowledged the list of things that we have delivered as a Government. The point is that we are still committed to delivering all of the measures in the kept animals Bill. I think that, with a number of the commitments we have made, we can actually go further and deliver these things faster than they would have been delivered by pursuing them through a single Bill. We remain committed to delivering them, and we will deliver them in good time.

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): MBR Acres is a facility in Huntingdon that breeds beagles for the purposes of animal scientific testing. A number of my constituents have written to me raising serious concerns about the inhumane and cruel treatment to which some of those dogs are subjected. Will the Minister consider meeting me to discuss how some of the measures he has announced might be made applicable to those animals? Will he also consider closing the loophole in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 which says that animals bred for the purposes of scientific testing are exempt from its protection?

**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend will be aware that there is already an extensive amount of legislation on the statute book to protect animals. However, it is always a pleasure to meet her, and I am sure we can arrange a meeting either with me or with another relevant DEFRA Minister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Christian Wakeford.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

"In our action plan for animal welfare, the Government committed to exploring further action in this area, which we are free to do now that we have left the EU."—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 320WH.]

Those were the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) two years ago. Members were told that a consultation on banning the fur trade was under way, but we are yet to hear the Government's response or their plans to stop importing animal cruelty through this evil practice. Either this is negligence, or they do not care about these animals—which is it?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that fur production is already banned in the UK. We launched a call for evidence on fur, and we will publish the results very soon.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The UK proudly has some of the strongest animal welfare protections in the world, and my right hon. Friend is right to highlight the progress that His Majesty's Government have made on animal welfare. However, there are a number of areas where we can do more, and one such area is the dangerous importation of heavily pregnant dogs as part of the puppy smuggling trade. Will my right hon. Friend please outline how we can quickly move to better protect animals from this cruel trade? While others seek to play politics, I am happy to help the Government to deliver that.

**Mark Spencer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He will be aware that stopping puppy smuggling is a manifesto commitment. We know there is a huge amount of support among parliamentarians and stakeholders for stopping it. It is a priority of ours for a single-issue Bill, and such a Bill would give us the opportunity to bring forward additional measures. For example, under the kept animals Bill, bans on imports of young puppies, heavily pregnant dogs and those with mutilations, such as cropped ears or docked tails, would have been implemented through secondary legislation, which would have taken quite a long time. Under this route, we will be able to do that much more quickly and to deliver it sooner than we would have done.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I do not know whether the Farming Minister is watching the latest series of "Succession"—he might find all the Machiavellian antics, betrayal and backstabbing a bit too much like taking the day job home—but the actor Brian Cox, who plays Logan Roy in the series, is backing Compassion in World Farming's campaign to ban factory farming. How is the Minister, with this very petty and piecemeal approach to animal welfare legislation, going to get our farm animal welfare standards up to the point that all consumers and all our voters want to see?

**Mark Spencer:** I would point the hon. Lady to our track record of introducing regulations for minimum standards for meat chickens, banning conventional battery cages and introducing CCTV in slaughterhouses. We really have made huge progress on animal welfare. I also pay tribute to UK farmers up and down the country, who get out of bed in the early hours every morning to look after their animals, and to make sure they are well tended and well cared for. I think we have a very proud record of animal welfare and animal production in the UK.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): I thank the Minister for reminding me of the work this Government have done on dog welfare, particularly on puppy breeding and protecting service dogs. Would he consider supporting Emilie's law, which I introduced this week as a ten-minute rule Bill? It seeks to make it a criminal offence if somebody allows their dog to irresponsibly kill another dog, which is a loophole in section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. We protect service dogs and assistance dogs if somebody's dog injures or kills them, but we do nothing at the moment for pet dogs. Will the Minister sit down with me and consider supporting Emilie's law?

**Mark Spencer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend not only for drawing that to my attention now, but for doing so in private. I can only imagine the stress and upset of someone having their dog attacked by another dog in a public place, and that ending up in the fatality of their pet. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can assist her with it.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I and many other Labour Members have long called for the kept animals Bill to be brought back to the House so we can work collectively with the Government to deliver on animal welfare, not to mention to deliver on the Conservatives' solemn pledge in their last election manifesto. However, many Tory Back Benchers are weak on animal welfare and on action, and today's statement shows that Ministers do not have the courage to face down so many rebellious Conservative Back Benchers. The kept animals Bill was originally delayed because Ministers could not agree on policy in line with their Back Benchers. Does the Minister agree that today's statement binning the Bill, and letting down millions of British animal lovers, demonstrates that the Government no longer have control over their Back Benchers?

**Mark Spencer:** That is just wrong. This demonstrates that we think there is a better and more efficient and effective way to deliver the things we have committed to. The good news is that the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to help and support the Government in delivering them as these measures go through the House, albeit in a different format. I look forward to seeing him in the Lobby supporting the measures we are going to bring forward.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): My constituents do not really care whether these issues are dealt with in one big Bill or a series of single-issue Bills; what they are concerned about is that the Government deliver on the promises they made to protect animals from cruelty. My constituents are no different from the Minister's, and many of them write to me regularly about animal cruelty issues and about how they want the Government to act.

Unfortunately, many of the proposals the Government are promising to bring forward today cannot apply in Northern Ireland because the laws in Northern Ireland are made not by this Government but by the European Union as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework, including those on the export of live animals, the import of mutilated dogs, hunting trophies imports and—if the Government decide to bring forward legislation on it—the import of foie gras. What can the Minister do to ensure that my constituents have the same benefits of such legislation as those in other parts of the United Kingdom?

**Mark Spencer:** Characteristically, the right hon. Gentleman speaks directly and frankly, and I support lots of his comments about wanting to deliver on animal welfare. We are trying to achieve that through this statement, albeit through a different vehicle from that originally proposed. He tempts me to stray into areas that are way beyond the remit of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I know his concerns are recognised in Government Departments and not least in Downing Street, and I know that they will seek to help him with the challenges he faces.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I had the pleasure of visiting the Dogs Trust facility in my constituency last year, where I saw the excellent work it does and heard about its campaign against puppy smuggling. The Minister has yet to explain the timetable for this separate single-issue Bill, even though he has been asked a number of times, including by those on his own Benches. It is important to note that there is concern not only among Dogs Trust supporters; in the last few minutes, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation has said that it, too, is deeply disappointed by this statement and that it represents a huge “missed opportunity”. These are not party political games; the same message is coming from Conservatives, the Opposition and animal lovers across the country. Can the Minister give us a firm timetable for dealing with the cruel practice of puppy smuggling?

**Mark Spencer:** I am glad the hon. Gentleman recognises that we continue to be committed to delivering on puppy smuggling, but the measures in the kept animals Bill will now be divided into smaller, bite-sized chunks so that we can get through them and deliver them more quickly. Instead of being bogged down in endless amendments and political games, we can now get on and deliver on all these commitments, and expedite the process of making sure we get them on the statute book.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): My predecessor, Neil Parish, was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare from 2010. Like other farmers in the west country, he cared deeply about welfare standards. That was evident to me last weekend when I visited the Devon county show. The Australia and New Zealand trade agreements will come into effect next Thursday, in spite of opposition from my party. The Australia trade agreement

“simply opens up UK agricultural markets for Australian produce, whether or not produced to the same standards that are legally required of UK farmers.”

Those are not my words, but those of the National Farmers Union. Does the Minister agree?

**Mark Spencer:** I, too, had the privilege of visiting the Devon show and meeting west country farmers and seeing the brilliant livestock they produce to the highest welfare standards. The hon. Gentleman is factually incorrect on the Australia trade deal: we specifically and deliberately excluded pork, poultry and eggs from that deal because they did not meet the welfare standards we expect in the UK.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that we are a nation of animal lovers, which is why today's announcement to drop the kept animals Bill is such a disappointment and such a failure by this Conservative Government, so will the Minister apologise to the millions of animal lovers up and down the country who were expecting this legislation to come through?

**Mark Spencer:** What I can do is reassure the hon. Lady that we are still committed to delivering all those measures in the kept animals Bill, but we will do that more quickly, efficiently and effectively than we would have done using that vehicle. So the commitment has not changed; only the vehicle for delivery has changed.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Whipsnade zoo carries out fantastic, world-leading conservation work, which I have been lucky to see at first hand. Thousands of my constituents wrote to me during the pandemic calling on Government support for zoos, which never came. Then there was the incompetence over Brexit negotiations, which stalled conservation work even further, and now they have dropped zoo standards entirely. Why are they so weak? We are indeed a nation of animal lovers; it is a real shame that this Tory Government are not.

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Lady is factually incorrect. First, I pay tribute to the zoo sector. A number of zoos up and down the country have the highest welfare standards and the best work and research into supporting endangered species anywhere in the world. We enjoy a close working relationship with the zoo sector and will continue to capitalise on this to identify non-legislative ways of reforming the sector, including boosting the excellent and valuable conservation work they do, and by the end of this year we will publish updated zoo standards, which we have developed in collaboration with the sector and zoo experts along with the Zoos Expert Committee, and we will raise standards and make enforcement even more effective.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to the questions asked of him.

We are in the exceptional circumstances of having had three statements, business questions and an urgent question today, which puts a lot of time pressure on the two Backbench Business debates. Clearly they are both about important subjects, so the decision has been taken by the movers of the second debate to postpone it until a future date, and I think that is absolutely the right thing to do. Those who are present for the second debate are therefore not needed and may go home or attend to other business.

## Backbench Business

### Ukrainian Holodomor

2.48 pm

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the Holodomor was a genocide against the Ukrainian people.

The motion stands in my name and that of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), but I am grateful to the many right hon. and hon. Members from five different parties who supported the application for a debate. I am also grateful to the Government for allowing time today to debate this important issue in the Chamber. Before I move to the substance of the debate, I acknowledge the presence of His Excellency Mr Vadym Prystaiko, the ambassador of Ukraine to the UK, and his colleague.

Today, right hon. and hon. Members have the opportunity to recognise the holodomor officially as a genocide against the Ukrainian people. His Majesty's Government's long-standing policy is not to recognise a genocide unless a competent court has declared it as such, which is very unlikely in relation to a series of events that took place 90 years ago, so this is likely to be the only chance we have for the UK to be added to the ever-growing list of countries that recognise the atrocities committed by Stalin's USSR in Ukraine in 1932-33 for what they were: a genocide.

Ninety years ago, in the spring of 1933, millions of Ukrainians starved to death. However, there was no natural famine in Ukraine. There was plenty of grain to go around, but it was all subjected to Moscow's impossibly high grain tariffs. Moscow then exported millions of tonnes of grain to the west while Ukrainians were dying in Stalin's forced famine. The word "holodomor" means to inflict death by hunger, and that is exactly what the USSR did in Ukraine. I will come to the terrible details of the famine, but, in discussing genocide, it is important also to understand the context and the motivations of the USSR's leadership in Moscow.

While holodomor means "death by hunger," the term has come to refer to the entire Stalinist campaign to destroy Ukrainian identity and nationalism at the end of the 1920s, leading to the forced famine of 1932-33. Once Stalin had consolidated his power as party leader by the end of the 1920s, he began to impose much harsher controls on independence, including banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the arrest, deportation and execution of Ukrainian nationalists and the cultural elite. Intellectuals, writers and artists committed suicide rather than be deported to Russia. Wholesale agricultural collectivisation took place from 1929, while wealthy peasants had their property taken away. By the mid-1930s, 100,000 such families had been deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan.

I turn to the terrible details of the famine, which was the final piece of Stalin's attempt to destroy the Ukrainian nation and people. Stalin was aware—we have seen this demonstrated so many times over the past year or so of the war—that the Ukrainian national spirit and identity reside strongly in the rural and agricultural communities across the country. In response to resistance to agricultural collectivisation in 1932-33, Stalin's Government imposed impossibly high grain requisition quotas, which had to

be satisfied before any grain could be kept by the local population. In 1932, not a single Ukrainian village met the quota assigned to it. Anyone who kept grain destined for Russia was executed by firing squad. Special police roamed the countryside, searching homes and summarily executing those found to have stored food, however small the amount. Men, women and children starved to death in their villages. But this was not a famine; there was enough grain to feed the entire population comfortably. The grain was exported to Russia and Ukrainians were prevented from escaping their country.

At the height of the famine, 25,000 people died of starvation every day, including children who were obviously too small to feed themselves. Some tried to commit suicide to escape the horror of starving to death. Gareth Jones, a well-known journalist, wrote:

“I walked...through villages and 12 collective farms. Everywhere was the cry, ‘There is no bread; we are dying’”.

Those who refused to steal or to leave died of hunger. Those who tried to steal were shot. Those who tried to leave were returned to their villages to face the same impossible choice. Villages turned to cannibalism to survive. The dead were unburied and the sick untended. Those are difficult details for us to hear.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I attended the holodomor memorial in Kyiv with the hon. Lady. All the things she describes are laid out in great detail there. I was so overcome with emotion I could stay for only 10 minutes, although the visit was over an hour. It is unbelievable that we have not recognised it as a genocide. It is so very clearly a genocide. In the United Kingdom we need to review how we define genocide if we cannot define the holodomor as one.

**Mrs Latham:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which shows that recognising the genocide has cross-party support. We are all concerned about that.

The exact number of victims is unknown because the Soviet Union refused to allow reporting of the famine, but it is estimated that between 7 million and as many as 10 million people died in Ukraine itself, with more in the neighbouring Soviet states. There was no natural famine in Ukraine, as I said, yet millions died from starvation due to Stalin’s policies. The cultural elite were deported, Ukrainian culture and language suppressed, and rural communities broken. The Russians closed their Ukrainian borders and refused to send aid, while simultaneously selling millions of tonnes of grain to the west. In the aftermath of the holodomor, the Soviet leadership resettled some of the decimated villages with ethnically Russian communities, aiming to eradicate Ukrainian independent identity. All of that is very clear evidence that the holodomor meets the conditions required for genocide.

Raphael Lemkin, the man who defined genocide, put it very clearly in a speech at the 20th commemoration of the holodomor in New York City in 1953. He described it as

“perhaps the classic example of Soviet genocide, its longest and broadest experiment in Russification—the destruction of the Ukrainian nation”.

He recognised that there were no attempts at “complete annihilation”, as had taken place in the holocaust. However, as he says, in an incredibly powerful quote which rings true to this day, given what is happening in Ukraine now:

“And yet, if the Soviet program succeeds completely, if the intelligentsia, the priests and the peasants can be eliminated, Ukraine will be as dead as if every Ukrainian were killed, for it will have lost that part of it which has kept and developed its culture, its beliefs, its common ideas, which have guided it and given it a soul, which, in short, made it a nation rather than a mass of people”.

I have no doubt that the holodomor amounted to genocide, an attempt by Stalin to destroy the Ukrainian people.

I will now turn to why I believe the House should agree to the motion. As a matter of principle, we as a country should recognise genocides whenever and wherever they occur. The crime of genocide is rightfully seen as one of the worst atrocities that can ever take place. All countries should identify it and stand against it in the strongest terms. The UK Government have constrained themselves by recognising only those genocides that have been declared as such by a competent court. One of the biggest challenges in obtaining a court ruling is that, in international law, referrals often need the consent of the states involved. This process is even more difficult when the successor state to the accused, the Russian Federation, is one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Therefore, irrespective of the weight of evidence that the holodomor was a genocide, it is incredibly unlikely that we will ever see the case tried by a competent court.

In the absence of official Government recognition, today’s substantive motion will constitute a resolution of the House of Commons specifically designating the holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian people. I have often been asked, “Why now?” That is a perfectly reasonable question, 90 years after the event, but I believe the House of Commons should recognise the holodomor as a genocide. After all, those who survived it have now died. In the two previous cases where the House has recognised a genocide, they were ongoing, so the resolution of the House could help to serve as a warning to the perpetrator that they would not get away with it.

The memory of historical events, particularly historical trauma, is fundamental to national identities. Through my work on the International Development Committee, I have been closely involved in hearings where we analysed the impact of Srebrenica and the importance of its recognition on Bosnian national identity today. I have also visited Rwanda on multiple occasions and have heard the same argument. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) said, we visited Ukraine earlier this year and went to the holocaust memorial centre, which is a moving place to go and a reminder of the worst periods of Ukraine in living memory—until now.

The importance to Ukrainians of recognising the holodomor is shown by the fact that the Ukrainian Parliament has criminalised holodomor denial in Ukraine. That matters not just to victims but to the perpetrators, who need to be reminded that they cannot get away with it. The House should act now because the holodomor is still relevant both to Ukraine and to Russia, and to the ongoing maintenance of international legal norms. The second reason for acting now is the situation that hangs over this whole debate: the war in Ukraine.

In the current war in Ukraine, as I heard during my visit to Kyiv in February, the Russians have been accused of crimes against humanity. We were shown cars burnt out and riddled with bullet holes, where Russians had gunned down civilians trying to escape their homes.

[Mrs Latham]

We must give confidence to the Ukrainian Government and the international legal order that the UK Government—or at least the UK Parliament—will not stand for human rights abuses and war crimes. Putin has said that his current intention is to eradicate the whole concept of Ukraine—very like Stalin's. That potentially falls within the definition of genocide. I believe that international order should act, first to ensure he is not able to carry out his threat and secondly, to hold him to account for his intention.

Recognition of the holodomor is important for the Ukrainians living in Ukraine, for Ukrainian refugees in this country and for descendants of Ukrainians living in this country who came here many years ago, and who wish for it to be recognised. It is so important that we do that, because we are beginning to become an outlier. Australia, Canada, Ireland and Brazil have all officially recognised the holodomor as a genocide. Until recently, both Germany and the USA were in a similar position to the UK, as their Governments did not recognise a genocide unless it had been confirmed by an international court. However, since the Russian invasion, in an attempt to show their support, both countries have passed resolutions in the Bundestag and in Congress respectively, recognising the genocide at a parliamentary level.

In March, the French lower house, the National Assembly, officially recognised the holodomor, and the Senate followed suit last week. At the turn of 2023, Bulgaria, Belgium and Iceland joined the ranks of countries officially recognising the holodomor. On Tuesday, the Slovenian Parliament declared the holodomor a genocide. In coming months, the Spanish Parliament and the Parliament of the Netherlands will have the opportunity to do so.

Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is more important than ever for the UK to show our support, to deter Russia from any potential thoughts of genocide, to reassure Ukraine that the international legal order will hold anyone who commits crimes to account, and to show solidarity with our recently greatly increased Ukrainian communities in the UK, in memory of the terrible tragedy.

I would like to finish by reiterating my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to secure this debate, which is incredibly important for every single Member across the House and, as I said, the Ukrainian communities in all our constituencies.

The holodomor was, to my mind and to paraphrase Raphael Lemkin, the archetypal genocide. The USSR murdered millions of Ukrainians, using policies of forced starvation and forced migration, reminiscent of what is going on in Ukraine today. Stalin in the 1930s, like Putin today, was aiming to destroy the nation of Ukraine and the concept of Ukrainian identity, so I hope that today we will vote to recognise the holodomor as a genocide. Then we can send a clear message to Putin, and to the world, that the UK Parliament stands with Ukraine and that war crimes, either historical or current, will not be tolerated.

3.5 pm

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this important debate.

I start with the recent testimonies of Petro Mohalat and Oleksandra Zaharova, two Ukrainians who survived the holodomor as children. They said:

“There was a brigade with pitchforks who came to every house searching for bread. I was five at that time. We locked the door and all the windows but they used crowbars to come inside. I saw people who died. They made a pit and threw all the bodies there. My father went to Western Ukraine, taking everything good from our home to exchange for food, but he got nothing.”

Some 90 years on, the memories of those dark days live on, as does the campaign for the world to recognise the great famine for what it was: a genocide. It is estimated that the holodomor claimed the lives of at least 4 million people—around one in eight of the Ukrainian population. Entire villages perished as Soviet authorities knowingly set unmetable grain quotas, raided homes for any hidden food to confiscate and banned internal travel to stop people leaving.

The mass starvation was no accident. Contrary to propaganda, it was not just the result of drought or bureaucratic mismanagement—it was an act of mass murder, a calamity deliberately inflicted on a nation by an imperialist, totalitarian regime. It was engineered to crush Ukraine's resistance, and it coincided with Stalin's campaign of Russification of suppressing Ukrainian culture and identity, reversing the earlier Bolshevik policy of encouraging it. The holodomor was a great crime against humanity, and its impact has been felt in Ukraine and by the Ukrainian diaspora for generations.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that for many communities around the country, such as the Ukrainian community in Reading, this is still a very live issue and many people are deeply concerned about this debate?

**Nadia Whittome**: I completely agree with the points made by my hon. Friend. I know he has been working closely with the Ukrainian centre in Reading.

What further deepened that immense trauma was the state-enforced silence that followed. For more than half a century, those who survived the great famine and saw their loved ones die of hunger were not allowed to openly discuss the horrors they had been through. Under Stalin's rule, even mentioning the famine carried the risk of being sent to a gulag or executed.

Evidence of the scale and true causes of the tragedy were concealed and fabricated. Even the statisticians who conducted the national census, which showed a dramatic population decline, were killed, and the data was manipulated to hide the number of victims. That was a systemic suppression of historical memory—the collective gaslighting of a nation. While the archives have since been opened and the truth is now easier to access, Putin's regime has continued with a policy of downplaying the seriousness of this atrocity and denying its genocidal nature.

Agnieszka Holland's film “Mr Jones” tells the real-life story of Gareth Jones, a Welsh journalist who risked his life to inform the world about the holodomor, and who was murdered a few years later. In 2021, a screening of the film in Moscow, organised by a human rights non-governmental organisation, was interrupted by a group of masked men who stormed the venue. When the police arrived, they shut down the screening, locked the doors and spent hours interrogating the audience, rather

than the mob who came to disrupt it. Last year, in Mariupol, Russian occupiers used a crane to dismantle a holodomor memorial.

It would be impossible to have this debate without mentioning the current context in which Ukraine is fighting yet another attempt to violently subjugate it. Let us send a clear message that we see and understand Ukraine's struggle against Russian imperialism, not just over the past 15 months or since 2014, but across centuries. While the oldest survivors of the holodomor are still alive, let us honour their decades-long battle for truth and justice. Let us join 28 countries around the world, and the European Parliament, in recognising the holodomor as a genocide.

3.10 pm

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I rise to support the motion, and to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for bringing the debate to the House.

Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Croatia and, of course, Ukraine are the most active countries in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I currently chair as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. It is very much from that perspective that I will speak today. Why are those countries among the most active in our alliance? It is because they know persecution and oppression. They have lived it, and in Ukraine many live it today. They live with the results of the holodomor of the 1930s. I believe that that is one reason why the Ukrainians have such a strong character now, and are able to stand so commendably against what Putin is doing to attack their country.

All too often—I hope I will be forgiven for saying this—those of us who have lived our lives mainly in the UK, and have even reached a certain age, see opposing persecution or discrimination on account of what people believe or who they are as a principle worth fighting for. That is worthy, but for the central European country colleagues with whom I work it is more than a principle; it is a lived reality. They have suffered, their countries have suffered, their families have suffered. My Slovakian counterpart as a Government-appointed representative on the IRFBA is Ambassador Anna Záborská. While she was growing up as a young girl, her father spent 12 years imprisoned by the communists for his beliefs. Ambassador Robert Rehak, the vice-chair of the alliance and the Czech Republic representative, was a teenager in the late 1980s when the communist state police came to his school and told him, “If you speak out once more, we will take you away.” He knew that they meant it, because he had seen bodies taken away through the streets of Prague in black bags.

Today, we have heard again about the deliberate starvation of people in Ukraine by the USSR within living memory, during Stalin's purges in the 1930s. To us, the cruelty that was inflicted on millions then is almost beyond comprehension. Farming families were thrown out of their homes and off their farms, losing their livelihoods, and were deported or given the option of being forced to work in collectives or starved. They were barred from returning to the fields that many had farmed for generations, even to gather a few grains, on pain of being killed—as many were. According to one

account, teenage children were placed as border guards on the watchtowers above the fields of grain so that local people did not return to their farms to gather even a small amount of food. One such youth even betrayed his own father, who had tried to return for food. His father was killed as a result, and, tragically, the boy was then killed by his grieving grandfather.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire spoke of cannibalism during that period. I read, with incredulity, an account of children's limbs being displayed for sale as meat on a market stall. This dehumanisation, this total absence of respect for people as human beings, contrasts starkly with what motivates so many of us today to work for freedom of religion or belief—the importance of respecting every individual as a human being, whatever their beliefs. During the period we are speaking of today and the communist decades, communism was militantly atheistic and declared religion to be its mortal enemy. Clergy were murdered and countless believers cast into prison and work camps, where many suffered indescribable torture. Hannah Arendt, the philosopher and feminist scholar, says of totalitarianism—a state that seeks to control not only actions but thoughts and emotions:

“wherever it has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of man.”

In the novel “The Unbearable Lightness of Being”, by Czech writer Milan Kundera, the character Sabina, a lifelong citizen under communism, says:

“the moment someone keeps an eye on what we do, we involuntarily make allowances for that eye, and nothing we do is truthful.”

Perhaps the most utterly moving book that I have read describing the holodomor and other heartrending suffering in the USSR, particularly in Ukraine, is “Stalin's Children” by Owen Matthews. He traces his family over three generations, several of whom lived through Stalin's purges. The book was published over 10 years ago, but it is harrowing to read it today as Putin crouches at the door of so many of the countries I mentioned at the beginning of my speech—Ukraine, yes, but many other countries that border or are near that country.

That is why I believe it is so pertinent that the next freedom of religion or belief ministerial will be held in the Czech Republic at the end of November under the title, “FoRB Under Authoritarian Regimes”. The people of the countries in that region lived through those regimes. They have stories to tell and lessons that they have learnt. They have a collective message to convey out of their collective memory about what can happen when an ideology seeks to suppress religious belief, and with it human dignity and life itself.

That is a message that needs to be told. A 2019 survey found that only 51% of US millennials—their UK counterparts could well be the same—believe that the declaration of independence offers a better opportunity for freedom and equality than the communist manifesto. Any romanticised perception of communism must be debunked. In the UK, the Holocaust Education Trust has in recent years been doing a tremendous job educating our children and young people about the horrors of the holocaust, so that maybe—just maybe—“never again” becomes a reality for their generation as it has not been for ours. Similarly, the horrors of life under the communist regime before and after the Nazis must be told to this young generation—horrors that include the holodomor. Recognising the holodomor as a genocide is one way we can begin to address this.

3.18 pm

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a privilege to speak after three such powerful contributions. I commend in particular my hon. Friend and colleague on the International Development Committee, the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), for her opening remarks, which set out so many of the important facts.

There is a very large Ukrainian diaspora in Scotland, including the south of Scotland and my constituency. During the war, there was a prisoner of war camp near Lockerbie called Hallmuir, which is important to the Ukrainian community because the Ukrainian chapel created by prisoners there has been preserved and is now being enhanced. It was a great pleasure to welcome his excellency the ambassador to the chapel prior to Putin's invasion, and indeed prior to the contemplation of that invasion.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire said, the holodomor is a hugely important issue for the diaspora and it was an issue before the invasion. It is not an issue that should be addressed because of the invasion; it is an issue that should already have been addressed. One reason for it not having been addressed is ignorance. People did not know the full scale of the atrocities and it is only more recently that what happened to the people of Ukraine prior to the second world war has become known. Having that knowledge puts into context some of the things that happened in the build-up to the war and subsequently, and it is important that people see events in that period in that context.

We have heard many details of the atrocities. I found it so difficult to hear a young man's account of the system whereby people would come round to remove dead bodies. His grandmother was dead, but his sister was still breathing. However, the man who came to collect the bodies took the view that he would just take her anyway, because then he would not have to come back the next day or the day after. It is virtually impossible for us here and now to understand how it was to live in that environment. Previous speakers have set out other equally horrendous examples.

Through his illegal war and propaganda, we have seen Putin try again to stop Ukraine feeding the world, which has caused hunger in other countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, by obstructing grain exports. Of course, he then blamed Ukraine for people not getting the food they need.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend add to that list of consequences the energy crisis throughout Europe, which is partially affecting the world, which was driven by the fact that, for an extended period, the supply of gas from Russia to Germany was maintained, the result of which was to create an energy crisis at such a pitch that countries such as the UK are now suffering inflation and far too high gas prices? Does he believe that that is also a very important factor?

**David Mundell**: I agree. My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Part of Putin's strategy is to create as many problems as possible for other countries, and then to blame those problems on somebody else. In this House, we must always be clear that the energy crisis, at its heart, comes from Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

As my hon. Friends have mentioned, it is very difficult to say exactly how many people died in 1932-33. Estimates vary, but a 2003 UN report put the figure at about 7 million to 10 million people. Those numbers do not, however, tell of the privations experienced, which we have just touched on. They do not tell of the slow and painful deaths. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) mentioned the turning to cannibalism; many people were compelled to do that. But the holodomor did not come from a poor harvest, bad weather or poor stewardship of land, which we often associate with the Soviet era; it was man-made—by Stalin and his apparatchiks. It was a deliberate act, the culmination of an assault by the Communist party and Soviet state on the Ukrainian people. Their agricultural produce was requisitioned from them by the Russian leadership. Their land was taken from them. They were starving, but banned from leaving their homesteads. Many had no choice but to die. None of it needed to happen. It was the result of deliberate decisions and what was the reason? The productive agricultural lands of Ukraine were a patchwork of small holdings, and people having a little more than enough to feed their own families made them ideological enemies of the Soviet state. That so-called “class element” has perhaps given some commentators cause to question whether the holodomor constituted a genocide. They are, however, making a distinction without a difference. It is clear that the deliberate and systematic murder of millions of people cannot be classified in any other way than as genocide. We in the UK need to recognise that.

I pay tribute to people such as Dr Peter Kormylo in Scotland, who has long campaigned on these issues. As I said in my opening remarks, these issues did not come to the fore because of recent events, but they are all the more poignant, as others have said, because of those events. We can send a very clear message to the Ukrainian people that we not only recognise the suffering they are experiencing at this moment, but understand the suffering they have experienced previously to get them to this point in their history. Therefore, it is very important that the House follow the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and adopt the position that she so eloquently set out.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: I call the SNP spokesman.

3.27 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): We have heard from hon. Members across the Chamber some of the personal horrors that were experienced. When we hear words such as “millions”, it is tempting not to drill down and understand that, when we are talking about millions of people being killed in this way, we are talking about millions of horrific individual experiences. Members have done well in reflecting that.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) deserves praise for bringing this issue to the Chamber today, along with the Backbench Business Committee. It is vital for us to discuss the holodomor and to get action on recognising it as a genocide as a result of this debate because, as she pointed out, the UK Government's position on this is—let us be delicate about it—out of date, to say the least. They need to change that, but I will come to that in a moment or two.

The hon. Lady talked about how important this is for Ukraine's identity, a theme that will continue. She eloquently described some of the horrors of the holodomor that were enforced on people in Ukraine by Stalin.

The hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) talked very movingly about the testimony from families, and described the holodomor as a great crime against humanity, and it is. Like others, I am very keen to bring that into the current context of the illegal war in Ukraine.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised the subject of freedom of religion and belief, and pointed out that the Ukrainian people know repression; they have experienced it for so long that they have had to become resilient to it. Again, she recounted some shocking examples of the horrors inflicted on them. We should listen to that, because without the international spotlight being on the illegal invasion by Putin's forces, who knows what other horrors might be going on, in addition to those being wrought on the people of Ukraine? It is important for this to be recognised and seen.

The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) talked about the diaspora and how important it is for the Ukrainian people here and in other countries to see the UK Government recognise their situation, and it is vital that that is done. It is 90 years since the holodomor. It was, as others have said, a man-made famine that claimed millions of lives and, as I have said, led to millions of individual stories of suffering. Its acknowledgement is a crucial chapter in our global history, for its implications reach far beyond the borders of Ukraine. Today, Ukraine is fighting not only for the respect and sanctity of its own borders, but for the very principles of world order and the international rule of law.

In understanding the holodomor, we should be clear about its origins. It was not simply a tragedy, but a political act of terror perpetrated by Stalin's regime. It was a horrifying result of policies designed to quell Ukrainian independence and aspirations. Starvation was used as a weapon of control and domination. It was a strategy, as we have heard time and again, that resulted in the death of millions of people.

Why should the UK recognise the holodomor as a genocide? Recognition is more than just a label; it is about admitting the truth of historical events and acknowledging the extent of suffering endured by the Ukrainian people. It serves as a message that we will not turn a blind eye to unimaginable acts of cruelty and injustice. It is a vital marker in the current context of Putin's illegal war. Recognising the holodomor as a genocide holds implications for the present illegal war and sends a strong message to the world that any use of starvation as a weapon—we have heard today about other tactics that have been deployed by Putin's forces to try to force deprivation on the people of Ukraine—is utterly unacceptable and constitutes a most grave violation of human rights. In this recognition, we also remember and honour the victims and survivors of this horrific event.

As we have heard, the European Union and 28 other countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia, have officially recognised the holodomor as a genocide, but the United Kingdom has yet to take this step. We must align ourselves with these nations not simply to match them, but to uphold the principles of justice, human rights and historical accuracy that we, as

nations of the UK, should hold dear—if we do not, I ask the Minister why not. Our Government here in the UK should formally recognise the holodomor as a genocide, reaffirming our commitment to human rights and sending a clear message to any regime that contemplates using these tactics as a weapon.

The UK Government could and should establish a special tribunal for the crime of aggression and, in addition to military aid, we should continue to support Ukraine by fostering strong political, economic and cultural ties. Let us join in the commemoration activities, champion the rights of Ukrainians here and abroad, and continue our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Acknowledging the holodomor as genocide is a tribute to and a remembrance of millions of victims, an assertion of historical truth and a powerful stand against the repetition of such horrors. Let us not shrink from our responsibility to history and humanity. The time for recognition is now.

3.34 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who is not with us today, for securing this debate. Their commitment to raising the profile of the holodomor has rightly drawn recognition from across the House, and it is truly a worthy subject for this House to consider. I also acknowledge our very good friends from the Ukrainian Embassy, who are in the Gallery.

This week, we saw the embodiment of Ukraine's continued defiance and bravery, as President Zelensky attended the G7 and ensured that the crimes against his country rightly remain at the epicentre of global focus. We saw that bravery exemplified again when he returned and visited marines on the Vuhledar-Maryinka defence line. As the fierce fighting in Bakhmut and other areas continues, the consensus and resolve across this House, and the commitment of the UK more broadly, to support Ukraine in driving back Russia's barbarous war machine has never counted more. We have heard many powerful speeches today, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome).

The war in Ukraine is entering a critical stage. Freedom must win out over tyranny and Putin's aggression must fail. As Ukrainians continue to defend themselves and prepare for a critical offensive, it is crucial that they know that nations around the world support their fight without wavering. I reiterate that the Opposition will stand with them for as long as it takes. Their decisive victory is not only morally right; it is the route to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition told President Zelensky when he met him in Kyiv, whichever party is in power in the UK in the future, there will be no let-up in Britain's resolve. We will continue to support Ukraine's brave defenders and its people in their quest for freedom, peace and justice.

In light of this debate, we must also continue to reflect on the immense historical suffering Ukraine has endured, as well as the remarkable courage and resilience of its people and the progress that has been made over the years, which has sadly been pushed back in so many areas by Russia's barbarism. This debate has brought home the fact that today's illegal and unconscionable war comes after a history of Ukraine being subjected to

[Stephen Doughty]

immense brutality, especially in the terrible events of the holodomor—one of the most atrocious instances of man-made famine in European history, which as we have heard today culminated in the deaths of millions of people.

Like many hon. Members, when I was in Ukraine just a few months ago I not only witnessed the aftermath of the Russian atrocities in Ukraine today, but visited the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide and the memorial. The content that was displayed there was incredibly moving and shocking. I draw attention to my declaration of interest as a shadow Minister in relation to that cross-party trip.

Everybody should recognise the reality of what happened to the Ukrainian people. It was very sad to see that some of the exhibits in the museum had been removed for safety because of the current conflict. It is clear that Stalin's role in catalysing enforced, man-made, widespread starvation, particularly in 1932 and 1933, understandably and rightly lives on in the Ukrainian national psyche and among Ukrainians worldwide. That is true not least in Canada, where I spent time when I was younger, nearly 25 years ago, and first heard about that terrible period in history from Ukrainian Canadians.

The barbarism we saw 90 years ago carries as much salience today as ever, particularly given what we have seen since. The personal stories are some of the most harrowing, as we have heard today. A congressional commission that took evidence in the late 1980s heard from an individual who grew up in the village of Stavyshe, who spoke of watching people dig into empty gardens with their hands in a desperate bid to find anything to eat, of witnessing people bloated from extreme malnutrition collapsing on the road one by one and, of course, of the mass graves.

It is a tragedy that today we again see mass graves in Ukraine and hear terrible stories of atrocities being committed. As with the war today, there was a clear perpetrator behind the famine. Stalin's motivation to transform and mould the Ukrainian nation in his own image at any cost is mirrored in Putin's warped, imperialist world view, the consequences of which continue to devastate the lives of Ukrainians. Indeed, Putin's misguided and perverse attempts to wipe out Ukrainian identity are the most recent manifestation of Russia's penchant for interference, subjugation, war and atrocity.

This topic carries particular weight for me as a Welsh MP, as I said when we debated it in Westminster Hall a few months ago. A great deal of what know about the holodomor came to us thanks to the bravery of a Welshman, Gareth Jones. We have heard about the excellent and very moving 2019 feature film, "Mr Jones", which was directed by Agnieszka Holland. Gareth Jones was born in Barry, in the Vale of Glamorgan—just a few miles away from my constituency—in 1905. Of course, as many Members will know, it is suspected that he was murdered by the Soviet NKVD in 1935. Sadly, so little changes.

After witnessing the horrible consequences of Stalin's tyranny at first hand, Gareth Jones detailed those consequences—we have heard many quotations today. He said:

"I walked along through villages and twelve collective farms. Everywhere was the cry, 'There is no bread. We are dying.' In the train a Communist denied to me that there was a famine. I flung a

crust of bread which I had been eating from my own supply into a spittoon. A peasant fellow-passenger fished it out and ravenously ate it. I threw an orange peel into the spittoon and the peasant again grabbed it and devoured it. The Communist subsided."

In a letter to David Lloyd George, the then British Prime Minister, Jones wrote:

"Dear Mr. Lloyd George,

I have just arrived from Russia where I found the situation disastrous. The Five Year Plan has been a complete disaster...and has brought famine to every part of the country. I tramped alone for several days through a part of the Ukraine, sleeping in peasants' huts. I spoke with a large number of workers, among whom unemployment is rapidly growing. I discussed the situation with almost every British, German and American expert... The situation is so grave, so much worse than in 1921".

Of course, Jones defied Soviet attempts to censor him, and reported the truth of the holodomor to millions. In another echo of history, the Kremlin continued to deny the existence of the famine, launched a mendacious campaign against Gareth Jones and tried to silence him, but it could not. The parallels with today are striking: journalists, correspondents and reporters from many countries, not least Ukraine itself, are putting themselves in danger to expose the true extent of Russia's barbarism and war crimes. They are integral to thwarting Putin's concerted information war and to bringing justice to those who have been subjected to war crimes and atrocities.

I have a few questions for the Minister about the current context, which draws so much on those horrible historical parallels. We have seen concerted attempts by Russia to lie about and weaponise food supplies to the rest of the world. In a dreadful parallel to the way it used food as a weapon of war in the holodomor, it is now doing so with the rest of the world. The truth about that must be known and fully understood globally. Indeed, there are reports this week that the Ukrainian port of Pivdennyi has halted operations because Russia is not permitting ships to enter, effectively cutting it out of the deal allowing safe Black sea exports.

What are we doing to tell the world the truth about Russia's continued interference with world food supplies from Ukraine, including the mining of fertile Ukrainian agricultural land, and the impact on prices? What steps will be taken to rebuild Ukraine, its agricultural capacity, its ability to thrive and its economy in the future? What will we do to seize, not just freeze, Russian state assets?

The upcoming reconstruction conference is a critical opportunity to support Ukraine and our diplomatic coalition, and it must be seized. The Minister knows that he has our full support in his endeavours for that conference, and I thank him for discussing it with me. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that adequate resources are generated at the conference, particularly to support reconstruction? Efforts will also be needed to bring back full agricultural capacity to Ukraine, particularly through the removal of landmines and unexploded ordnance, which we know cover so much of the country and could cause problems in food production for years to come.

I will write to the Minister about a number of concerns about our sanctions regime. We have debated the sanctions regime in many Statutory Instrument Committees, but I have some specific concerns on which I hope he will come back to us urgently, because we all want the most robust regime against the atrocities that Russia is committing today.

Historically and today, the price that Ukrainians have had to pay for their freedom is immense. The events of 90 years ago are an anguishing and chilling reminder of the consequences when tyranny runs without constraint and imperialism without restriction. We are tragically unable to undo the horrors of the past 90 years ago, but we can take resolute steps to prevent them from happening again today.

Given the comments that have been made today, I have one fundamental question for the Minister. It is clear that these were appalling, historic atrocities in the holodomor that deserve proper recognition. It was a tragedy on an appalling scale. I hope he will be able to set out clearly what the Government's policy is on the recognition of genocide and respond to the important questions raised, particularly in relation to the legal and precedential context, and how the Government intend to respond if the motion is agreed by the House, not least given the international movements on this issue, which a number of Members referred to, in particular the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire.

Finally, I assure Ukrainians at home and abroad that we see your suffering and bravery, both historical and present. We will remember the terrible events of the holodomor, and we will stand resolutely with you today.

3.45 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):**

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate and for maintaining over many years a spotlight on this horrific issue. I thank all colleagues for their moving contributions to today's important debate. We were pleased to welcome in the early stages of the debate the Ukrainian ambassador to the Court of St James's—we value his terrific diplomacy on a daily basis. Of course, we must never stop learning from these events.

I was grateful for the contribution from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), and I will cover the questions he asked before I make substantive remarks. I can reassure him that we are very active in countering disinformation with regard to food supplies. He asked some pertinent questions about the international efforts to rebuild Ukraine with regard to agriculture and wholesale reconstruction. That will be the theme of the Ukraine reconstruction conference next month. I will not pre-empt the content, but I am pleased that he will be involved, along with other shadow Ministers. I would be pleased to consider his queries regarding our sanctions regime if he puts them in writing.

I turn to the substantive question raised in this debate. In simple terms, when it comes to the Government's stance on genocide generally, there is universal agreement that the holodomor was one of the darkest chapters in Ukrainian and European history. It was a vast and horrific man-made disaster that killed millions of innocent people, as we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, so calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and others to designate it as a genocide are wholly understandable. Nevertheless, I believe that there are sound and logical reasons for this Government to maintain the long-held position of UK Governments and refrain from making determinations about whether a genocide has or has not been committed.

It is a long-standing policy of the Government that any judgment on whether genocide has occurred is a matter for a competent court, after consideration of all the evidence available, rather than Governments or non-judicial bodies. This approach ensures that genocide determinations are above politics, above lobbying and above individual, political or national interests. It means that UK Government references to genocides are harder to dismiss by those responsible for genocidal acts. The Government believe that this remains the right approach, because it gives our words authority. This in no way detracts from our recognition of the appalling events of the holodomor.

**Drew Hendry:** Everybody in this Chamber is on the same side in wanting this to be explored properly and recognised. Is the Minister saying that the European Union and the 28 other countries that have recognised this as a genocide do not have the legitimacy that he is saying the UK Government do? That does not necessarily hold with most people's understanding of this matter.

**Leo Docherty:** I am saying that, notwithstanding the other important political events that have happened in other Parliaments, it is very important for the long-term legal integrity of the UK Government's position that we maintain our consistency of approach. That does not detract from the horror of the holodomor, as I have said, nor our recognition of the appalling brutality of Stalin's policies and regime, and nor does it dilute our determination to remember the victims of the holodomor, as the Prime Minister did by lighting a candle at the memorial for them when he visited Kyiv in November. Other colleagues in this House have also done so, and have reflected upon that this afternoon. Of course, our officials in Ukraine, including our ambassador, regularly attend similar commemoration events.

Today, we stand firm in our support for Ukrainians amid growing evidence of appalling atrocities committed during Putin's illegal war. As colleagues will know, we have supported our Ukrainian friends since 2014, and we continue to be at the forefront of international support for Ukraine, in both humanitarian and military support. We were the first country in the world to train Ukrainian troops; we were the first in Europe to provide lethal weapons and to commit tanks; and just this month, we were the first to provide long-range missiles. I am very pleased that we are now at the forefront of a coalition to train and equip the Ukrainian air force.

I will briefly turn to accountability, which is an important theme, given the debate we have had. We have been working alongside our Ukrainian friends and the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's office to help them investigate and prosecute alleged war crimes. We have been working alongside the EU and the US to establish the atrocity crimes advisory group, in order to co-ordinate international support for Ukraine's war crimes investigations, and we welcome the step taken by the International Criminal Court to hold those at the top of the Russian regime to account, including Vladimir Putin. In March the UK co-hosted the Justice Ministers conference, alongside the Netherlands. That conference brought together global partners to enhance financial, practical and technical support to the ICC and its investigation into the situation in Ukraine. Very importantly, we are part of the core group of G7 nations that are exploring options to investigate and prosecute the crime of aggression

[*Leo Docherty*]

committed in and against Ukraine, including a potential special tribunal. Accountability is at the heart of our support to our friends in Ukraine.

**Stephen Doughty:** I was pleased to be invited to a meeting with the Ukrainian Justice Minister and the UK Attorney General during that period, and I thank the Minister for that—he knows he has our full support on those prosecutions. Could he give us an idea of the timeline for that working group on the special tribunal? Obviously, this is an idea that has been in the ether for some time now.

**Leo Docherty:** That is a valid question, and the answer is “as soon as possible.” These things are not easy; if they were, we would have done them already. Work is underway apace, and my colleague the Attorney General visited Kyiv earlier this year in order to expedite some of that work. We will keep colleagues in this House updated.

To conclude, the holodomor and Putin’s war are two of the darkest chapters in Ukraine’s history. Our stance is that any determination on genocide must be made by the courts; that does not, of course, detract from our recognition of the holodomor as the most appalling disaster, one that resonates today in the shadows of Putin’s modern aggression. The UK is supporting Ukraine to fight back and to bring those responsible for appalling acts of brutality to justice.

**David Mundell:** I fully understand what my hon. Friend is setting out, but for those in the Ukrainian diaspora in the UK, given all the things he has mentioned that the UK is currently doing, how would the UK’s standing be diminished in any way by recognising the holodomor as a genocide?

**Leo Docherty:** I do not contend that it would be—I think our support is clear, including support to Ukraine’s judicial system and the ICC to investigate and prosecute alleged war crimes. Of course, we share Ukraine’s determination that Putin’s illegal invasion must fail and that justice must be done. As President Zelensky said earlier this month in The Hague, there can be no peace

without justice. The desire for Ukraine to prevail, and for justice to prevail, remains something that unites us all across the House.

3.54 pm

**Mrs Latham:** I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members across the House who have taken the time to attend this important debate on the last day before recess, which is not the best day. We have had some incredibly thoughtful contributions and some harrowing and shocking examples of what happened during the holodomor. Members from all parts of the House have shown a great deal of cross-party unity in today’s debate, which is not the same in every debate we have in the House. The holodomor was a terrible crime against the people of Ukraine, and I am glad that the House finally has the opportunity to express a formal view on its classification as a genocide, although I have to say I continue to disagree with the Minister and his predecessors on the determination to which they have come.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House believes that the Holodomor was a genocide against the Ukrainian people.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** The second Backbench Business debate has been deferred, so the motion is therefore not moved.

## Business without Debate

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We now come to the motion on the Committee on Standards.

**Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con):** Not moved.

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

*Ordered,*

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

## Asylum Seeker Accommodation Off Wirral Peninsula

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Ruth Edwards.)*

3.56 pm

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am grateful to have finally secured an Adjournment debate on a matter of such great significance to my constituents and, I would hope, to all those who believe in the need for a more compassionate asylum policy. On 14 April, officers at Wirral Council were informed by Home Office officials of Government proposals to accommodate up to 1,500 vulnerable asylum seekers on a vessel berthed in my constituency of Birkenhead. The vessel will be located on the site of the Wirral Waters development, an active work site in an area of Birkenhead without adequate transport links to local amenities, services and community support networks. To all intents and purposes, it would be a floating prison ship.

I should be clear that, as far as I am aware, no deal has yet been concluded between the Home Office and the owners of Peel Ports to accommodate refugees at Wirral Waters. However, given that large barges and ferries are already being deployed elsewhere in the country for the purposes of housing refugees, and that the Home Secretary has staked her reputation on adopting a punitive approach to those who come to this country seeking sanctuary, the direction of travel is clear.

When news of the plans broke, it caused considerable concern across my constituency. Questions were rightly raised about the capacity of the borough to cope with a scheme of this scale and nature, and whether our overstretched and underfunded local services would be able to provide effective support to such a large number of refugees without there being a serious impact on the services provided to local people in one of the most deprived communities in the country.

The proposed location of the vessel is the £4.5 million Wirral Waters development site—that is a cornerstone of the ambitious programme of regeneration now under way in Birkenhead—and that has caused great consternation. After years of delay, work is well under way in bringing that project to fruition. Businesses and communities across Birkenhead are counting on the project to succeed, but it is hard to see how that work can safely continue if the site becomes home to as many as 1,500 people.

The implications of the proposal for my constituency are serious, but I want to be clear that my concerns first and foremost are for the welfare of the refugees themselves. I have not called this debate to say, as other Members have in previous debates, “Not in my backyard.” Instead, I proudly and without equivocation say that refugees are welcome here. The question that the Government must answer today is fundamentally a moral one: how on earth can they justify a policy that treats fellow human beings with such inhumanity?

Wirral has a proud tradition as a place of refuge, from my ancestors who fled famine in Ireland to the Ukrainian families who are making it their home today. We are proud of our record of opening our doors to those in need. Our borough has taken the second-highest number of refugees in the Liverpool city region across all Home Office pathway programmes, behind only the city of Liverpool itself.

It has accepted the highest number of people under the Homes for Ukraine scheme in the entirety of the Liverpool city region. However, we need to ensure that people who come to the UK in the pursuit of refuge are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about the importance of compassion towards refugees in this country. My community has also accommodated many needy people. Does he agree that there needs to be more support from the Home Office in many cases? I raised a case with the Minister recently—he was very generous in helping me with the matter—of a child who would have been unable to sit their standard assessment tests in Reading, and would have been moved to Plymouth at a time when it was vital for them to continue their education in their existing school. Does my hon. Friend agree that there ought to be more thought from the Home Office about supporting refugees at times of great need, not moving them when it is unsuitable to do so?

**Mick Whitley:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I think this debate is all about dignity and respect, and I hope the Home Office and Ministers will be mindful of that.

The Government's policy of using disused ferries, boats and barges to house refugees may satisfy the legal criteria of their statutory duty to house refugees, but it falls far short of the obligations we owe towards those in need and it betrays the trust that these vulnerable people have placed in us. As soon as I learned of these proposals, I immediately wrote to the Home Secretary. By the standards of the Home Office, the Minister for Immigration's response was remarkably prompt: I only had to chase him up three times in writing and raise a point of order in the House before he got back to me. Of course, his letter fails to acknowledge my request for a meeting with him and Home Office officials, and he has not engaged in any meaningful sense with my concerns about the welfare of the refugees whom he intends to strand on an active worksite on the periphery of my constituency or the impact that will have on local services. I have been forced to pursue an Adjournment debate because of the Home Office's stubborn refusal to be transparent about its plans. I understand that, from the Minister's perspective, much cannot be said publicly, but refusing to engage, even in confidence, with the local Member of Parliament about a decision of such great significance to their constituency is not only discourteous but, frankly, absurd.

As I said when I raised this matter on a point of order on 17 April, Members have a right to know what is happening in the communities they represent. With the recess imminently approaching, I hope the Minister may be more obliging in providing some clarity. First, if an agreement is reached to accommodate asylum seekers on Wirral Waters, what steps will be taken to address the health needs of refugees living in a cramped and overcrowded environment, where disease could spread rapidly? Secondly, what additional financial support will be made available to Wirral Council to ensure that refugees get the support they need, without there being an adverse effect on the quality of support available to local people living in one of the most deprived communities in the country? Thirdly, what steps will the Government take to ensure that refugees can access local amenities,

[Mick Whitley]

services and vital community networks, rather than being left to rot on a worksite, considering that dramatic cuts to local bus services have left the area without adequate transport links? Finally, what steps will the Government take to ensure the physical safety of the refugees, especially in the wake of the terrible scenes outside the Suites hotel in Kirkby in February, when a mob attempted to storm the hotel? I believe that, were the Minister to seriously and honestly engage with all those questions, he would quickly realise just how unworkable and unethical the proposal is.

The Minister for Immigration said in his reply to me—I expect this to be echoed in the response we shall hear shortly—that the Government have had no choice but to implement such extreme measures and that asylum accommodation is now costing the taxpayer £6 million a day. We have heard that this is being driven by the rise in small boat crossings experienced over the last year, but if we are looking for someone to blame for the crisis, we should turn not to the desperate men, women and children who felt they had to risk their lives on dangerous channel crossings, but to Government Members. Since 2014, the asylum backlog has more than doubled, despite the UK receiving just 8% of all asylum applications made across the European Union and the UK in 2021. As of 31 December 2022, more than 161,000 people were stranded in limbo waiting to have their claims heard with the primary cause being that applicants are waiting longer than ever to have their claims processed. This is a Conservative crisis for which innocent people are being forced to pay the price.

I secured this debate to talk about the situation facing my constituency of Birkenhead, but it would be remiss of me not to end by reflecting on the broader national context. The evolution of asylum policy in this country has followed a clear trajectory towards ever more punitive treatment of those who have done nothing more than exercise their legal right to claim asylum. It has culminated in Ministers attempting to house refugees on disused ferries and in this House's voting for the Illegal Migration Bill, a despicable Bill which breaks entirely with international law. Yet none of it has done anything to stem the numbers of people coming to the UK in search of safety, and nor will it. All that the hostile environment has done is perpetuate the misery of people who have already experienced the most unimaginable suffering.

But there is an alternative. That begins by enshrining the principles of respect and dignity at the heart of a new, fairer asylum system. It necessitates the establishment of safe and legal routes to the UK so that no one is ever forced to risk their lives, or their loved ones' lives, in the English channel. It requires the Government to get serious about making the investments needed to tackle the asylum backlog and end the miserable limbo which so many asylum seekers are forced to endure for so long. And it means that rather than treating them as a burden, we should be harnessing the experience, ability and talent of people waiting for their asylum claims to be heard by allowing them to seek paid work, contribute to the economy and find accommodation of their own. There is a better way.

4.6 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this debate. The concerns of Members

of this House and their constituents should be taken seriously, and they are being taken seriously. I will set out shortly the work we are doing and are looking to do with Birkenhead.

First, however, it is right to set this in the national context, as the hon. Gentleman did, because the situation we as a country find ourselves in is not sustainable. The number of people crossing the channel in small boats has placed the asylum system under enormous pressure. The continued occurrence of these dangerous, illegal and wholly unnecessary journeys has left us in the invidious position of having to resort to using hotels to house asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute in order to fulfil our legal obligations. The enduring solution is of course to stop the boats and break the business model of the people smugglers, which is why we have brought forward the Illegal Migration Bill. In the meantime, however, it is right that we take steps to minimise the impact on local communities and reduce the burden on the taxpayer of the use of hotels.

The Home Secretary and I have been clear that hotels are inappropriate and we must shift to more suitable forms of accommodation. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a hotel in Kirkby in the Liverpool city region which was the subject of violence—unacceptable levels of violence—earlier this year, but that highlighted the difficulties of pursuing this route for housing asylum seekers and the need to find better, more sustainable solutions.

The challenge we are facing as a country is a significant one and it calls for innovative approaches, such as the use of military sites and vessels. These sites are undoubtedly in the national interest and the UK Government approach is in step with those of our northern European counterparts. A number of other European countries, such as Ireland, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, are looking at similar approaches and how they can house very large numbers of asylum seekers in ways that are of lower cost to the taxpayer and more sustainable while they work to find solutions to the migration crisis that the whole continent is experiencing.

We have not made a final decision to place a vessel in Birkenhead port. However, we have identified the port as a potentially viable location and are seeking to engage the local authority, the local NHS, police, other emergency services and other public agencies to help to inform a final decision. A multi-agency forum is being established, and will meet imminently, to assess the risks and identify mitigating actions. The forum, like others that we have established elsewhere in the country, will include representatives from national, regional and local public sector agencies and the Home Office. I hope that local stakeholders, including Wirral Council, will participate in the forum in the collaborative manner envisaged. It is certainly important for statutory officers, such as those of the council, to participate and fulfil their responsibilities.

I will use this opportunity to answer some of the hon. Gentleman's specific questions. He asked whether the vessel would be, in his words, a "prison ship" or a non-detained facility. The Home Office has no intention of using the vessel as a detained facility. The migrants who would be housed on it would be living in a non-detained manner, which means that they could leave the boat and spend time on the shore, whether that be in communities nearby in Birkenhead or further afield. That would be carefully managed by the Home Office

to ensure the safety of the migrants, community cohesion and the impact on local town centres and high streets. There are ways in which we are able to do that, which we have learned throughout our experiences elsewhere in the country, such as at the non-detained facility that we operate at Napier in Kent.

The hon. Gentleman implied that this was an unorthodox approach. It is one that is being used both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe today. The Scottish Government have used vessels to house Ukrainian refugees, for example, in Leith in Edinburgh, over the last year or two. My understanding is that that experience has been broadly successful both for the refugees and for the local community. The local council has been extremely helpful in supporting those individuals and the Government have rightly provided resource to the council to meet the costs of doing that.

The barges and ferries that the UK Government are looking at have in many cases been used by British workers, such as those working on large construction sites, or oil and gas projects. Indeed, some are ferries that have been used for police and other staff at the Olympics or at COP26 in Glasgow. It would therefore be wrong to characterise them as inhumane or indecent. That is not the intention of the Government.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question of the important regeneration project at Wirral Waters. As a former Local Government Secretary, I am familiar with that, as there was—and I believe continues to be—a role for Homes England in its development. Nothing that the Government do should in any way imperil the success of that important regeneration project. We have already made that commitment to the parties we have spoken to and, in our future engagement with Wirral Council, we will do everything we can, should that project proceed, to protect the integrity of the Wirral Waters scheme.

The use of a vessel, whether it be at Birkenhead or in any other location in the UK, would only be for a very limited period. In most cases, we have proposed using these vessels for 18 months, after which they would be moved away and a different solution found.

The hon. Gentleman raised the understandable concern about the impact on his local authority and other local services in his area. All parts of the country face pressures on public services, but I understand that Birkenhead has particular challenges in respect of deprivation and we as national Government should take those challenges

seriously. If we were to proceed with the project, we would provide funding to Wirral Council to recompense it for any work it does to support the project. We would also provide funding for the police in Merseyside to ensure they are able to support the safety of the migrants on the vessel, the security of the port and the safety of residents in neighbouring communities. We would also work with the local integrated care board to ensure that there is suitable healthcare provision.

What we are offering on a similar vessel in Portland in Dorset is a basic primary care facility located on or beside the vessel sufficient to meet the immediate needs of the migrants, and reduce pressures on local GPs and primary care providers, and some funding to the local healthcare authorities to ensure they are able to provide that and that there are minimal knock-on consequences for the wider healthcare economy.

We are also working with the UK Health Security Agency to work through some of the challenges the hon. Gentleman raised around communicable diseases, and to ensure that, when migrants come to vessels of this kind, they have been properly health screened in advance and offered vaccines, where appropriate, and that the correct checks and processes are in place to ensure diseases do not spread throughout the vessel or into the local community. Those are exactly the sorts of questions that we would now want to work through with Wirral Council, the hon. Gentleman and other local stakeholders.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House, and for raising understandable and important concerns on behalf of his constituents. I believe that the policy of using vessels and pursuing larger sites such as disused military bases is overwhelmingly in the national interest, but I understand that there will be very serious concerns in the local communities that are most immediately affected. It is right that he raises those concerns and that we work with him productively to address as many of them as possible. The Home Office will continue to engage with the key stakeholders in and around Birkenhead as we work through our proposals. I hope that he and I can forge a productive partnership if we choose to take this forward.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.17 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 May 2023

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Inshore Industry Fishing Crews: Visas

1.30 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered visa arrangements for inshore industry fishing crew.

This is a massive issue for myself and all of us here. We have a deep interest in this subject, and we come once again with a request. As the Minister knows, in January this year I had the opportunity to meet him and discuss this issue. I brought along my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and two reps from the fishing organisations in Northern Ireland, because we had some really deep concerns with where we are going and the importance of where we are about. I will outline the case for fishing and visas.

I thank all hon. Members for being here, and the Minister as well. He will know that when I put forward my case, I always try to do it in a constructive fashion and in a way that tries to get to a solution. I try to make everything I do solution focused and solution based; I know that other Members will try to do the same thing, but I want to make that point to start with.

The fishing industry in Northern Ireland supports about 1,400 jobs. It is the single biggest employer in the communities of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie, in my constituency of Strangford. I represent the fishermen in Ardglass and Kilkeel, even though they are not my constituents; their MP does not attend here because of the parliamentary oath, so they ask me to be their representative on matters through the fish producer organisations. Each of those communities relies on its fishing industry, and their fishing industry relies on access to Northern Ireland's inshore waters.

My case will be specific to Northern Ireland, unlike the request that I will make—I will tell the Minister my request. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and I spoke this morning, and I think his request will be similar. I also discussed the matter with my friends and colleagues on the Government side before the debate, so I think that we will all ask for the same thing. We are not asking for anything really gigantic, but we are looking for a small, solution-based way forward that we feel may be just what we need to get us over the line.

Why are we in this crisis? Affordable food that is healthy and sustainable is a good thing for all of us. No one has enjoyed seeing the cost of the weekly shop rise, and it is to the benefit of all UK citizens to keep food costs low, but we cannot have everything. If that is to happen, the simple reality we must accept is that it will be harder to entice UK workers into food production. The fishing industry can testify to that, having seen its demographic change towards the increasing employment of foreign workers over the past 30 years.

I have been involved with the fishing sector all my political life, which is quite a long time. I started in 1985 as a councillor, representing the peninsula area where Portavogie is. All that time, my brother was involved in fishing, and many of my friends were as well. Over those 30-odd years, we have seen a greater dependence and reliance on foreign workers.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I anticipate that we will hear the same sort of thing from the Minister that we heard from him in the main Chamber today—namely, that we should be growing local labour. Does the hon. Gentleman hear from his own constituents, as I do, that that labour simply is not there, and that there are reasons why local young people, in particular, are not going into the fishing industry? That is basically because, for decades, they have been told that this is an industry in decline that has no future. We will not turn that perception around overnight when the problem that the boats have is in the here and now.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my friend and colleague for that comment. I agree. I see it in Portavogie, in Ardglass and in Kilkeel. I will give an example: the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and the Irish Fish Producers Organisation put an advert out—when we were in the EU, by the way—to try to galvanise workers. Some 45 people inquired, five people responded to say that they would be interested in the job, and only one turned up. Whenever they did an advertisement across the whole EU, that was all the interest that there was, so there is an evidential base to prove the case that the right hon. Gentleman refers to.

I see in my constituency that people are not interested. Fishing is a hard job. It is one of the most dangerous jobs: more people are killed in the fishing sector than in many other sectors across the United Kingdom. People are going into other jobs, as it is a hard job. I remember going down into the bowels of one of those fishing boats in Portavogie one day. I said, “And where do you sleep?” The fisherman said, “In that wee place there.” We are born in a foetal position, and that is the way they sleep. It is impossible to know how anybody could ever sleep on a boat that is tossing about in the sea. The point is: it is a hard job.

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about the cramped living conditions on a fishing boat. When I was at school, I had a job painting fishing boats, so I was aware of the conditions. I have never been out in a fishing boat; if anybody watching this wants to offer me the opportunity, I will gladly take it up. He will have seen the conditions not just for the deck crew, the deck hands and the people we are talking about giving visas to; the skippers and the home-based crew of these vessels are in the same conditions.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He understands, as we all do, the practicalities, physical problems, obstructions and difficulties when it comes to fishing. We welcome foreign workers, and we need them. I gave the case of the two positions advertised right across Europe, when we were in the EU, and how many people inquired, how many said that they would take the job, and how many turned up. Foreign workers are now a vital and vibrant part of our fishing culture. They help us to supply the affordable food that every

[*Jim Shannon*]

UK shopper wants to see. They do so much for us, but we still cannot offer them the opportunity to come to the UK on a visa that is a good fit for the important work that they do.

We have a problem, but as I said before, I am solution focused, and I believe that we have a solution. I will put it to the Minister and hope that he can give us some flexibility in the process, which we can then take back to our people. The problem is that Northern Ireland's fishing fleet is penalised simply because of geography. Our position near the Isle of Man and the west coast of Scotland means that Northern Ireland vessels do not have the same easy access to waters outside the 12 miles enjoyed by fishing interests on the east coast of England, for example, or in Scotland. Consequently, our reliance on access to inshore waters means that employing crew on transit visas is no longer an option for fishing vessels in Northern Ireland, which is one of the problems.

We had the opportunity to meet the Minister in January this year, which was a chance to put forward a solution. I can probably add to the solution that we had at the time, because the two fish producers organisations in Northern Ireland, in connection and partnership with other fishing organisations in Scotland and indeed in England, put forward the suggestion that foreign workers could learn the English language before they come here, in a college in Sri Lanka that they are setting up. I will add another angle to that, but that is one of the solutions that the fishing organisations themselves are putting forward. It is practical, and it is costing them. They are not asking the Government for any money in that process; they feel that they can put it forward.

Our vessels are set to see their labour costs rise by up to 40% as they change from employing workers on transit visas to skilled visas—a cost that those in other parts of the country, by virtue of accident or geography, do not have to meet. That creates an unfairness where due to Home Office rules a fisherman fishing in one part of the United Kingdom is forced to pay up to 40% more for his crew than another fishing elsewhere in the UK. Northern Ireland's fishing industry welcomes the pay protections the skilled visa system brings. Nobody decries that; nobody says, "Don't do it"—we all accept and understand it. Indeed, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and I were talking about that in the voting lobby the night before last, because we understand that it is not an issue. The fishing sector is moving towards accepting it.

Northern Ireland's fishing industry does not begrudge paying our international fishermen what they are worth, but it is clearly unfair that those who pay skilled-visa salaries can be undercut by those who do not, simply through accidents of geography. The Home Office will, of course, argue that the skilled visa system meets Northern Ireland's fishermen's needs. In some ways, particularly in how it improves the freedoms enjoyed by foreign fishermen when ashore, it is a very positive step forward. The situation is not, however, quite that simple.

The International Labour Organisation's work in fishing convention, ILO 188, is an important piece of legislation, of which the UK is a signatory. It protects the welfare of fishermen. It rules, for example, that a fisherman must have his repatriation flight paid for at his employer's

expense, and that his employer should provide his food at sea. Northern Ireland's vessel owners willingly do both those things already—they are happy to.

The legislation, however, is effectively legally mandating benefits in kind that push the cost of employment up in ways that were not considered when skilled visas and their corresponding salary levels were devised. There needs to be a better understanding of that. Other employers who utilise skilled visas do not have to bear those costs, but fishing vessels do. Northern Ireland's fishermen have asked for the policy to be applied in a fair, considered and even-handed way. We do not ask for anything that is not achievable or possible. That is why I look to the Minister for a better understanding and a positive response.

I ask the Minister and every MP in the Chamber to put themselves in the position of a Northern Ireland skipper for a moment. Imagine being in the southern Irish sea, wanting to access fishing grounds inside 12 miles of the shore but being unable to because there are transit visa crew onboard. Mr Vickers, imagine that you have tried to recruit skilled visa crew members, but those capable of passing the English-language requirement do not yet exist in sufficient numbers to make that option viable. Looking out of the wheelhouse window of the boat as it is tossed about on the sea, you see a French vessel fishing happily in the area that you are not allowed to work in. It niggles a bit when we are part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and our fishermen do not have the same freedoms as those from the rest of Europe.

The French vessel is allowed to work in UK waters because of the Brexit deal. I understand that—I understand how it works and where it will eventually lead to. The French vessel can also carry an international crew on the same transit visas, yet UK law affords it the exemptions that Northern Ireland fishermen are refused. That is a true story; I have not made it up—this is not an example without an evidential base. I suspect, in all honesty, that the Minister accepts that.

Northern Ireland's fishermen have had to watch EU vessels employ foreign workers in UK territorial waters. They are there without any visa scrutiny whatever, while Northern Ireland fishermen are forced to remain outside those waters. Can the Home Office please put itself in their position, and explain where the morality and the fairness is? For the life of me, I cannot understand it at all. Can the Home Office appreciate the ridiculousness of a situation where it is easier for a British fishing business to employ foreign workers in UK waters if it buys into a French or Irish-registered vessel, rather than one registered in the UK? That anomaly is grossly unfair, and it grieves us all; there is not one Member who represents the fishing sector who does not think that.

It is unfortunate that the Home Secretary denied the request of the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance; the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan and myself were also talking about the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance the other night. What it has put forward is a feasible and workable option, and one that should be looked at. The Fishermen's Welfare Alliance has asked for the full implementation of section 43 of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, and for more time.

As transit visa crews are replaced with skilled visa crews in job lots, some fishing boats will now be expected to go to sea with whole crews joining vessels they have never set foot on before, to work as part of teams that

have never met each other before. That poses the question of how practical that is. Professional mariners baulk at the very idea of this. They have issues with the safety, practicality and physical working of it. Fishing is already the UK's most dangerous profession. I said that at the beginning because it is a fact; I am not making it up. It is not the fault of the migrant fisherman that he has not been granted the time to safely integrate with his vessel and crew mates, yet he is the one carrying the risk.

In response to the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance, the Home Secretary raised concerns about the welfare of fishermen. If welfare is one of her considerations, I ask her not to make an already dangerous job more so. I ask her to reconsider on the grounds of safety, with a short delay to the full implementation of section 43 so that crews on transit visas may be replaced with crew on skilled visas as part of the staggered, safe transition.

I said at the beginning that I want to be constructive and give the facts of the case for us in Northern Ireland, but I also want to lay out where I think we can move forward. I am pretty sure that the opinions of everyone else here today are similar. Our Northern Ireland fishing vessel operator can see his colleagues in the North sea targeting the same species, yet, because of a line on a chart, his business has 40% higher labour costs. He sees an EU boat fishing inside the UK's territorial waters with a transit visa crew, yet his British boat, with the same category of crew, is not allowed there. Even if all his crew had skilled worker visas and he was allowed access to those waters, the French boat would still undercut his labour costs.

This is not about cheap labour, but I want to illustrate that point. Northern Ireland's fishermen welcome the wage protections that the skilled visas bring. Indeed, that will drive up wages for all our fishermen, local and foreign alike, which is good for the sector because at least it makes it more attractive from a financial wage point of view. For many of Northern Ireland's boats there is no great disparity in earnings based on whether someone comes from Kilkeel or Colombo, or Accra or Ardglass, but the same rules should apply to all. The skilled visa system links skills and education in a way that is not always reflected in real life. When we see what is put forward, it is very hard to understand why—I say this with respect to the Minister—he is not reaching out and saying, "Let's get that in place as soon as we can."

Most of the international fishermen employed by the UK industry have little by way of formal schooling, but they are expert in their profession. Sometimes people do not have an education, but they have the skills and the ability to work on a boat. That is the frustration that we have here: people who can do the job, but do not have the full grasp of the English language that they need to have. To prevent them from helping our own industry simply because they cannot pass the reading and writing elements of an academic English exam, which reportedly sits somewhere between GCSE and A-level in difficulty, is perhaps contrary to the bigger picture of ensuring our food security.

The Home Secretary has kindly offered a package of help designed to aid the transition to skilled visas. That is welcome, but if I could push that offer of help just a little further, this is the crux of what I would ask for: to recognise that the highly skilled people from around the world who are already part of our fishing communities

do not have to have the academic background that enables them to pass B1 level reading and writing. After all, fishing is something we learn in a boat, not in a classroom. Providing that formal academic training to our existing foreign fishermen, who are already working full time, will take months and cost individual fishing businesses tens of thousands in lost revenue because they remain unable to access inshore waters in the interim.

Assumptions are dangerous, and it is simply incorrect to assume that there is, anywhere in the world, a pool of eligible B1-standard fishermen who want to work in the UK. There is not, and that is the nub of the problem. The Home Office is asking the fishing industry to focus its recruitment efforts on a group of people who do not exist. The good news, and there is good news—I always try to bring good news, because that is my nature—is that the Home Office can do something practical to help.

Employers are allowed to pay skilled workers whose jobs are on the shortage occupation list a lower salary than would be the case if the jobs were not in shortage. Perhaps, for shortage occupations, the reading and writing elements of the English test could be reduced by one level from B1. That is my request. It is a practical solution to where we are, and it is a solution that the fishing sector and every MP here will put forward. The fishing sector will work alongside; if a partnership is needed to make this work, the Minister and the Government will have a partnership. The reading and writing could be reduced by one level from B1 for the first year of a person's stay only; after that, they would be required to pass a B1 exam to remain—which is where we are now—thereby protecting the integrity of the skilled visa system. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan will speak on that shortly and reiterate my point.

That little change could help the fishing industry retain many of the crew it already has by enabling them to successfully make the transition to skilled visas in a matter of weeks—almost right away—thereby minimising the economic cost of losing access to prime inshore grounds and minimising the accidents stemming from the employment of inexperienced and unfamiliar crew. I tell the Minister, with genuine respect, that here we have a solution that can work. Others will repeat that, and they will repeat it because it is right.

Fishing is an irregular occupation. It is unsurprising that it does not fit neatly into any of the current visa options—I understand that. Instead of trying to force square pegs into round holes, perhaps it would be better to begin a dialogue between the fishing industry and the Home Office as to how provision can be made within the framework of the skilled visa system to recognise those irregularities and help to make a better fit. We have put forward a solution, and I am confident that those who speak today will be united, because all of us represent fishermen who want the same thing.

We have great potential. After Brexit, we as a fishing sector were confident that we could move forward. I know that the Minister and the Government are committed to that, but we need some practical help with the technicalities of the system to make it happen. I have made the case, and I look forward to others' contributions.

1.52 pm

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In his

[*Anthony Mangnall*]

—if I may say so politely—lengthy speech, he has probably covered everything that every one of us will end up asking for. I agree almost 100% with his requests of the Minister and his suggestions for how we can help the fishing sector and turn on their head some of the long-standing and difficult issues for the industry.

Mr Vickers, if you were to come to south Devon—you are of course always welcome—you would be greeted by three extraordinary fishing towns of great variety: Brixham, Salcombe and Dartmouth. Brixham is the most valuable fishing port in England, as we all know—I spend half my time in this place talking about it—but in Dartmouth and Salcombe there is a large contingent of inshore fishermen, whether they are crabbers or day fishermen, who are really impacted by this issue. Indeed, the entire town of Brixham, which I think is now on its third year of record sales—a point that is often overlooked in the mainstream media—is absolutely dependent on visa arrangements. It is my pleasure as their representative to stand up in this place and talk about how we can do more for the fishing sector.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, fishing is all too often an afterthought. People do not fully consider the fact that fishing is a massive lever with which we can help to level up in our coastal communities and create good, well-paying, highly skilled jobs that allow our coastal communities to flourish. We need only read Professor Chris Whitty's report on how to level up in coastal communities to see that there is a huge opportunity for us to do more for our fishing industry, and that starts by changing our attitudes. It also starts by changing our habits; just eating more fish—more seafood—would help us to grow the UK's domestic market. That is something that a great people in my constituency, such as chef Mitch Tonks, are trying to do. He is leading a campaign to support the fishing sector and to talk about the fishing community and the great sources of food we have on our coastline.

I come back to the point about changing attitudes, because if we want to attract people into the fishing community, that is not going to be done by handing out visas to foreign workers; we have to change the approach. I welcome the Government's measure as a temporary measure, because I hope that, in the in-between period, we can put more into training.

On visa arrangements, it is absolutely welcome that the Government have reduced the cost of the visas and reduced the salary threshold, but I come to the point the hon. Member for Strangford made about the B1 English language requirement: if we are trying to fill a gap right now because there are not enough workers in the fishing community, how on earth do we hope to achieve that when the B1 language course is so complicated and, in many instances, lengthy?

**Mr Carmichael:** For the sake of argument, let us say that we do manage to train people to the B1 level in order to meet the visa requirements. We have heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the hard, difficult and occasionally dangerous work undertaken on a fishing boat. Is it just possible that people who have achieved the B1 standard of English might then want to take that skill and qualification and do a job that is perhaps more suited to somebody with that level of language skill?

**Anthony Mangnall:** That is quite possible but, again, what is the purpose of this debate? What are we trying to do here? We are trying to shore up support for the fishing community; we are trying to ensure that it continues to thrive. We have come up with a solution, but there is just one small roadblock, and the Minister just needs to move it.

The suggestion regarding the B2 level was well made, but I will just make this point. An organisation called Crew Services operates in the United Kingdom. It has on its books 325 non-UK crew who are working in the UK at the moment. Of them, only six have met the B1 English language requirement. That shows, in a very neat way, the difficulty we have with being able to bring in people in the helpful manner the Minister has brought forward. There are limitations because of what we are asking at the moment; it is going to be very difficult.

A lot has been said about training, and I realise that training is a lengthy process. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) that if he wishes to go out on a vessel, he is welcome at any time to come down to south Devon to do so. I went out two years ago on a trawler for 36 hours—it was probably the last time I did an honest day's work—and it was incredibly hard work. One of the things explained to me was the skill that goes into it and the dangers that come with it. I would like to say that I was thrown around that vessel by stormy seas, but unfortunately it was as calm as anything. However, for 36 hours, doing two hours on and two hours off, I saw the industry at work, how hard people work and the benefits of the sector.

In that instance, the young people working on the boat had trained locally, in the south-west. They were using local businesses to try to get into the sector, and that was working well. However, we clearly need to do more on this issue, so I would just make the point that, when the visa changes are implemented—that is very welcome—we should also take in hand training opportunities. In my own area of Totnes and south Devon, South Devon College has set up a training school, which is at the Noss on Dart site. It is now launching its own fisher apprenticeship scheme. It has had good attendance so far. There are a few minor niggles at the moment in how that programme is running, but more and more people are getting into it, and we in this place have to encourage them.

I absolutely declare my interest: we now need a Fishing Minister—a dedicated, stand-alone Minister—to be able to do all of this. I am sure that it is within the good sense of this Minister to be able to advocate that to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I congratulate the Government on the two very positive steps they have taken, on the reduction of costs and the reduction of the salary threshold. Will they please look at the language issue again? That is what the industry in my area is calling for.

I will not steal from the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, but can we also look at the processing sector? A large number of businesses in my constituency are exporting around the world. They rely heavily not only on the fishing community but on there being visas to allow people to work in their sector. However, that will undoubtedly come up further on in the debate.

I am very proud to represent the fishing community. We have some small asks that can make things easier and better, and where we can deregulate and make things more efficient. These steps will not cost the

Government much, but they will be applauded by the industry. I hope the Minister has heard my speech and that of the hon. Member for Strangford, and can implement our requests.

2 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Vickers. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing time for a debate on this important issue.

I represent Orkney and Shetland. Shetland's local economy is one third fishing-dependent, and that goes through everything. When I say fishing, I am including aquaculture to get to the one third, although a lot of the skills are transferrable in any event. We have the full range: we have small, one-person, inshore boats, right the way through to the largest pelagic trawlers anywhere in Scotland—apart, obviously, from Banff and Buchan, where there are ones that are just as big. I do not think we want to get into a debate about the relative size of the pelagic trawlers; that is not what we are here for.

I have to say that I am just a bit weary with this. We have been going round this course for at least 10 years—possibly more—and we have gone from patch here to fitch there. We have had a reliance on transit visas, which was—bluntly—an abuse of the transit visas system, but it was the only way that fishing boats could get access to the crew they needed. We can absolutely understand why that happened, but it left a lot of people who were coming here as crew vulnerable to a measure of exploitation, and there were stories around the use of transit visas that did no credit to some in the fishing industry. We need a system that actually respects the rights of those who come here and contribute to our industry, and who keep our coastal and island communities growing and thriving, and that respects the rights and entitlements they have as workers in our economy, rather than just pushing them sideways into the shadows.

The fishing industry has been promised a great deal by some in politics in recent years. Without rehearsing old arguments, it is fair to say that many in the industry feel that the promises made to them have not been honoured or delivered. It is certainly true beyond any measure of doubt that the deal done in 2020 by the former Prime Minister but one, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), did not meet the promises that had been made; indeed, in terms of much of the detail, it was greatly deficient. The trade and co-operation agreement has not delivered the opportunities that were promised, but the industry is nothing if not pragmatic, and it is working towards the renegotiation of that agreement. In the meantime, it would be nice to think that the people who promised the earth but did not deliver at the time would not just keep sticking the boot in while the industry is on the ground.

**David Duguid:** The right hon. Gentleman is right that the outcome of the TCA did not meet all expectations, but does he agree that our power at the negotiating table as an independent coastal state—this includes Ministers and officials in Scotland who take part in these negotiations—has become stronger and that our catching opportunities have increased? However, if we cannot get the people on the boats to catch the fish or to process them in the processors, that situation could potentially be at risk.

**Mr Carmichael:** There are constitutional issues that the hon. Gentleman and I are part of the debate on and have been for some years. In microcosm, the danger the fishing industry faces is thinking that the solution to everything is dependent on where decision making is exercised. Personally, I think it is more important to discuss the principles and policies underpinning decisions, rather than where those decisions are made. A bad decision in Brussels is just as bad as a bad decision in London or Edinburgh—that is probably as far as it is sensible to take that. However, the hon. Gentleman is right that we could have the greatest opportunities and the most magnificent quota and total allowable catches imaginable, but that is absolutely no use if the crew cannot be found to put the boats to sea.

In my constituency and others, and I suspect in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, that is the situation many skippers face. If the local labour were available, I have absolutely no doubt that skippers would use it in a heartbeat. Every fisherman I speak to tells me exactly the same thing. They say they want a thriving local industry, and they do not want to rely on people coming in on foreign visas, but they also live in a competitive market. The fishermen in my constituency are competing for people who could be recruited into the offshore oil and gas industry, aquaculture or the deep-sea merchant marine.

Those fishermen have to compete not just with those industries but with decades of teachers, careers advisers and commentators telling people that the fishing industry has no future, that it is in decline and that no one would want to go into it. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the local fleet in Shetland, there are fantastic examples of young skippers taking on big commitments. New boats are coming into the industry, in a genuine and visible commitment to the future of the industry. Those skippers just need a hand up. They are not looking for help—for a subsidy or a grant. They just want to be able to go to sea, to make money to provide for their family and to keep an industry going that is critical to the future of our communities.

The history of this issue bears a bit of repeating. We pushed water up the hill for years with the members of the Migration Advisory Committee. We reasoned with them. Eventually we brought them in and beat them up in a Committee Room in the Palace and they accepted that, yes, the job of a deckhand is a skilled occupation. That is how we made the progress that got us to the place where that job could be put on the shortage occupation list.

That brings us to the English language requirement. The concession that has been made is absolutely meaningless if we insist that the crew who are to be employed under it are capable of achieving that level of English language qualification. As I said to the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), people who have that academic ability will probably not be particularly suited to, or want to work in, a fishing boat. For the medium to longer term, it is difficult to see how there is any meaning to that concession whatever. If we were to get the fishing industry to fund training for people to get to that level, I strongly suspect that they would not be there for the longer term. All we would be doing would be training people for jobs that they would not ultimately take up.

At its root, the problem with the English language qualification is a fundamental lack of understanding in the migration system, and in the Home Office in particular,

[Mr Carmichael]

which seems to equate skill with academic ability. That is a particularly dangerous and—dare I say it?—fairly middle-class view of the world. A lot of people have highly skilled occupations, but have never actually achieved a great deal in terms of academic qualifications, because that has not been the direction in which they have wanted to go. I think what they do is perfectly legitimate. I respect what they do, and what fishermen are capable of doing. I sure as goodness would not go and do it, because it is hard, difficult, dangerous work. In the same way that I would hope that they might respect what I can do with my professional background, I respect what they can do with theirs. It does not always come down to what someone has by way of academic qualifications. The hon. Member for Strangford has already said what needs to be done. That tweak is all we really need; the problem for the Minister would then simply go away.

I want to offer two examples of what the situation means for fishing boat crews in my constituency. The first example is a family with two vivier crab boats. Like everyone I will talk about, the family have done everything that every Minister in every Government would ever tell them to do. They have worked hard, they have saved, they have borrowed to invest and they have grown their business to provide for the family. The father tells me that he does the work because he wants to have a business that he can hand on to his eldest son. He tells me, quite candidly, that he no longer knows whether he will be able to do that. He was fishing with fixed gear, within the 12-mile limit, until the day that his ability to do so was withdrawn. The gear is still sitting there, weeks down the line, because he cannot get the crew to go out and shift it.

When the Minister responds, perhaps he can explain this point. The waters to be included around Orkney include uninhabited islands such as Rona, Sulisker and Sule Skerry. That takes in waters that, for an inshore fisherman, are about 90 miles from the Orkney mainland. I presume that it was a deliberate decision on the part of the Minister to include Rona, Sulisker and Sule Skerry, so will he explain his reasoning? It does not make any sense to me. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about safety. When boats are out fishing, they will often dodge into those areas to get a bit of shelter in bad weather. If fishermen cannot take their boats there because they are fishing outside the 12-mile limit, they will be exposed to even greater danger.

That brings us back to one of the fundamental problems, with which we have been dealing for years: fishermen are forced to fish not where the fishing opportunities exist, but where their visa requirements allow them to. That, again, has to be a case of the tail wagging the dog.

The other example I offer is a Shetland fisherman who bought his boat some years ago. The boat and the quota together cost him around £1.4 million. He still owes the bank just south of £700,000—the figure was about £680,000 when I last spoke to him about it. He has always fished with a foreign crew within the 12-mile limit—well, perhaps not always, but certainly in recent times, because he was able to do so. He did so because, that close into shore, he could be certain that he was only catching haddock. If he has to go outside the 12-mile limit, he will be catching a much more mixed fishery—haddock, cod, ling and saithe. He is not allowed to catch cod, ling and saithe, because he only has quota

for haddock. Because of the discard rule, he is also not allowed to get rid of them. That is the vicious circle that leaves fishermen having to tie their boats up at the shore.

The basic truth is that if there is no crew, there is no fishing, and if there is no fishing, there is no ability to service the debt. Fishers will doubtless go out of business, and that income will be lost to the community as those families will no longer be able to make money for themselves. If the boats do not go out to sea, no fish will come into the factories to be processed. In that way, the effect of this decision ripples out through every fishing community in this country.

We are asking for a simple tweak to a fairly small piece of legislation that will not make a massive difference to the number of people coming here. The Minister spoke today about the desirability of offering visas to people who come here on a route that might eventually lead to indefinite leave to remain. He knows as well as I do that if that route is taken, there are other opportunities for the English language requirement to be tested and established.

The people who come here to fish in my constituency are not coming to stay, because their families are still at home in the Philippines or Ghana. They come here to fish for six, eight or 10 months at a time, and then they want to go home. Why would they not? That is where their family are. They come here and make good money working in an industry that looks after them and offers them opportunities. It is good for them and good for us. Why can the Home Office not just get out the way and let them do it?

2.16 pm

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate.

It is a genuine pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I wanted to intervene so many times during his speech, but I did not want to interrupt his flow. He made lots of very good points, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). We have not heard from the SNP spokesperson yet, but I am sure that we will broadly agree on most of what we say today. We all represent fishing communities, which, as we have heard, are as wild and varied in their needs and demands as the weather conditions they often face.

I thank the Minister and his officials for meeting me earlier this week to discuss this matter in some detail. It was probably one of the longest meetings with a Minister and his officials that I have ever had, but the fact is that we barely scratched the surface, because there is so much nuance in this industry and the devil is very much in the detail.

This is not a binary issue. It is not a question of whether immigration is bad or good. It is not even a question of whether immigration is legal or illegal. Nobody in this Chamber is advocating doing anything that would be against the immigration rules or classed as illegal immigration. It is right that the UK Government take every reasonable step to stop illegal immigration, stop the small boats coming across the English channel, and stop the disgraceful practice of illegal people smugglers putting vulnerable people at risk and taking advantage of them.

We are talking about a different kind of small boat, although sometimes they are not all that small. These fishing boats operate out of some of the most remote, sparsely populated areas, where unemployment rates are often so low as to be effectively zero. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, in a lot of these areas—particularly in Orkney and Shetland, and in Banff and Buchan, which I represent—there is huge competition from other industries. Traditionally, the competition comes from the oil and gas industry, but given the energy transition, the renewable energy sector is rapidly becoming a competitor, too.

I think we all agree that the system of using transit visas, which technically allow fishermen to enter the country on the basis that they will transit outside a 12 nautical mile limit to work, is not fit for the purposes described today. I have long said that a points-based immigration system, appropriately applied, could replace that system. It is on that basis that I welcome this week's announcement by the Home Office that share fishermen, trawler skippers and experienced deckhands on large fishing vessels are to be included on the shortage occupation list. Inclusion on the list means that jobs qualify at the 20% lower salary threshold of £20,960 instead of £26,200. However, as has been mentioned, the salaries being paid to those guys are fairly reasonable, and although that measure may help some people start out in the sector, it is not the main obstruction.

Being on the shortage occupation list also means that applicants will pay lower fees of £479 instead of £625 for a three-year visa. That is also welcome. Yet the broader English-language requirements of the skilled worker route will still apply despite the jobs being on the shortage occupation list. It will come as no surprise that, like other hon. Members, I will make that one of my main points.

I welcome the addition of experienced deckhands to the skilled worker route back in 2021. As other hon. Members have said, that followed long discussions between hon. Members such as those of us here representing our constituencies today and the Migration Advisory Committee. I have been doing this for six years; others have been doing it for longer. Through all that, there has been a genuine desire from us as representatives of our coastal communities and from the fishing industry to work constructively and in partnership with Government to come together and find the solutions that we know are there.

**Anthony Mangnall:** Of course, the debate is about the arrangements, but there is also the broader point about where we can reduce bureaucracy. We have skirted around the point about the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and health certificates. There is a series of measures by which we are inadvertently blocking people from getting back into fishing or getting into it. If we introduce the requirement for health certificates, that will have an implication for the visa arrangements of those who come over.

**David Duguid:** My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. That impacts the owners of smaller boats more than those of bigger ones, because bigger boats have bigger crews. On a bigger boat, if someone does not receive their health certificate, there are other crew members who can fill the gap. With a one or two-man crew, that becomes more of an issue. My hon. Friend is right to point that out.

Let me return to my point about collaboration between the industry, us elected representatives and the Government. We should take as much advantage as possible of that desire to collaborate and act constructively in partnership and dialogue. As I found in my meeting with the Minister earlier in the week, a face-to-face discussion is so much more productive than just the odd email going back and forth.

**Mr Carmichael:** The hon. Member forces me to intervene with his second reference to his meeting with the Minister. I am delighted that he got that meeting. On 20 April, when the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines) was answering my urgent question, which the Immigration Minister managed to dodge, she said:

"The right hon. Gentleman asks to meet the Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister. I can put that request to the Minister this afternoon, and I hope that it will be agreed."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 370.]

It would appear that her hopes were not well founded. What did the hon. Member do to get a meeting that I cannot?

**David Duguid:** I am not sure I want to give away any trade secrets, but, as I am sure the Minister will attest to in his response, a lot of ear-bending was involved—I am sure there has been a lot of that from all of us.

As hon. Members have mentioned, and as the industry and communities themselves recognise, we need to encourage more local people—particularly young people—in our coastal communities to consider a career in fishing. I think it is fair to say—I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes earlier and he agreed, and I am sure the situation is the same in Orkney and Shetland and probably in Strangford—that we are seeing the green shoots of people starting to think about it, but they are doing so in such small numbers. This is a generational issue. It will not happen overnight.

**Mr Carmichael:** As I said, we have young skippers taking on new boats in Shetland. If their experience is not financially favourable as a consequence of decisions like this, what will that do for the green shoots that the hon. Gentleman and I can see at the moment?

**David Duguid:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point. Not only is the industry actively taking steps to encourage people into a fishing career, but we have local education facilities such as the North East Scotland College in my constituency—that includes the Scottish Maritime Academy, which people attend from all over Scotland—and efforts by organisations such as the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, to name just a few of the organisations that are actively trying to make this happen. As Members have mentioned, there is so much we can do with automation, particularly in the processing sector, which I will come to later.

In its paper, which was mentioned earlier, the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance, in the process of asking for a 24-month period to make all this stuff happen, went as far as to make a commitment on behalf of the industry that within 12 months, up to 100 crew would be operating under a skilled worker visa; within 18 months, for vessels operating some or all of their time within the 12 nautical mile limit, no new crew contracts would be entered

[David Duguid]

under the transit visa route; and within 24 months, all non-UK crew working on vessels operating to an extent within the 12 nautical mile limit would be employed under a skilled worker visa. When I first read that, I thought, “Wow, really?” That is an ambitious target and a huge commitment on behalf of the industry.

As I said, this is a generational issue. Coastal communities around Scotland suffer from depopulation and loss of services—by the way, that is something that the Scottish Government and local councils need to look at, too—and from very low, effectively zero unemployment. The offshore catching sector, as well as those fishing inshore, can apply for the relevant skilled labour through the skilled worker route, but the main stumbling block is the standard required in the written English language test. As others have said, we are not denying that there is a need for a minimum level of English, for health and safety reasons and to avoid exposure to abuse, but the industry has proposed reducing the standard from B1. The hon. Member for Strangford suggested that too, and I have heard requests to reduce the level required to A2.

I went to school with people who went to sea. They left school at the age of 16 and they are now some of the most successful businessmen I know locally. They are very successful, and I have great respect for the work they have done to build up those businesses, but, by virtue of leaving school at 16, they did not achieve the English language test standard we are asking for from our non-native-English-speaking crew members. Many of them have been working on these vessels for many years, but they have not been required to pass the test until now. Again, we are not saying, “Let’s not have English language testing.” The industry is just asking for it to be applied at a sensible and reasonable level.

I heard the response by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, and I think I agree that the English language requirement is reasonable for those coming into the country on a route to settlement. However, I suggest that almost all of the fishermen we are discussing, if not all of them, are not seeking a route to settlement. I ask the Minister whether that might be seen as a means of differentiating these cases from cases where people are actively seeking to settle in this country. As the right hon. Member suggested, it does not seem beyond the wit of man or even Government to apply such a measure, and it would remain consistent with the overall principle that the English language test is a requirement of a visa that could lead to a route to settlement.

If such a move could be made on the English language testing, it would be a game-changer and would help this vital industry and our coastal communities not just to survive but to thrive, as we all know they can. The industry can thrive while maintaining and sustaining our marine environment without the need for hastily imposed and poorly thought out highly protected marine areas, which have been a source of much debate lately. That is perhaps for another debate on another day.

Will the Minister consider the wider seafood production value chains, which have already been mentioned? As I and people in the industry have said, Brexit and becoming an independent coastal state provides a fantastic opportunity to gain more access to catching in our own waters. That is undeniable. As domestic and international

markets recover from the covid lockdown, we are seeing demand for our excellent seafood produce grow, both at home and overseas, but the onshore processing side of the sector is experiencing similar issues with access to labour as those we have been discussing today. As well as this week’s announcement, I welcome the previous announcement that fishing jobs will be added to the shortage occupations list.

In a letter from the Home Secretary a few weeks ago, the industry was informed of other forms of support, including a service to guide employers and applicants through the visa and sponsor application process, ensuring that there are sufficient English language testing slots, expediting visa and sponsor applications, further accelerating the decision-making process for no extra charge, and dedicated points of contact in the UK Visas and Immigration service for the sector. That was reasonably well welcomed by the offshore catching part of the fishing sector, but this industry has sourced personnel from outside the European economic area for many years, so people are reasonably experienced in those processes. Such a suite of support, if it could be expanded beyond the catching sector, would be very welcome in the processing sector. This type of assistance has already been provided to other industries, including the food and drink processing sector, so there is precedent.

I welcome on behalf of seasonal fruit farmers the announcement of 10,000 additional visas for the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. I encourage the Minister and his officials to consider adding to that scheme, without necessarily increasing the numbers, those elements of the seafood industry that are seasonal—for example, the herring roe season.

**Mr Carmichael:** Yes.

**David Duguid:** I thought that might prompt a response. I think it is in October or November. Fishing happens all year round, but there is seasonal activity at a time when the industry struggles to find people. Adding that to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme or seasonal food workers scheme could be another option. Such a change would involve only a small number of visas, but it would have a huge impact on the coastal communities.

I will end on the subject of numbers. While we welcome the 55,000 annual visas for seasonal agricultural workers, the numbers that we are talking about today—I am surprised that it has not come up before—are in the hundreds, not the tens of thousands. In addition, we are talking about getting through a transition period, as other hon. Members have said, to a point in the future when, ideally, we would get every single person in the seafood industry working from the local communities in which the industries exist, but certainly we would be talking about very low numbers in the future.

2.33 pm

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As always, Mr Vickers, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this afternoon’s debate on visa arrangements for inshore fishing industry crews. It is good that it has brought together Members from Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), as well as, obviously my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I thank for bringing this motion before the Chamber and allowing us to discuss it again.

I say “again” not to be disparaging in any way. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked, how many times have we discussed the issues surrounding the inshore fleet? Yet certainly since I first came here in 2015, these issues have not been resolved and the Government seem utterly incapable of properly getting to grips with them, no matter how many times they are raised.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Strangford will recall us going to the Home Office in 2016, 2017, and I think again in 2019, with the representatives of our respective fishing organisations—and indeed, in one case with representatives from the Philippine embassy—to sit with Ministers and try to explain how the chronic shortage of professional seafarers in the UK is having a devastating effect on our communities, and how we desperately needed those professional fishing crews to be allowed to come and work in the inshore fleets, particularly around Northern Ireland and the west coast of Scotland. I am sure that the hon. Member will also recall that, for the most part, we were treated with great courtesy and listened to. Our ideas, we believed, would be examined. But then, every single time, the things that we asked for were rejected out of hand. I implore the Minister to please be the one to break that cycle.

**David Duguid:** In my remarks, I asked for more constructive engagement. However, would the hon. Member join me and others in seeking an actual meeting with Ministers—I know, it is difficult enough for us Conservatives to get meetings with Ministers—and officials, and with key stakeholders from the industry who know the industry far better than we do?

**Brendan O’Hara:** Absolutely. Despite having been there so many times in the past, I—and I am sure he, and every other hon. Member here today—would love to be able to sit down again with the Home Office, and with the representatives of these communities and industries, and say, “Please, let this time be different.”

**Mr Carmichael:** I am never going to give up on this. I think we have made that very clear. However, the reason why I am particularly unhappy about this now is that this feels like it is the final word from the Home Secretary.

The Fishermen’s Welfare Alliance engaged with the Home Office in detail and at length. It explained everything in incredible detail that even the slowest of learners must have been able to pick up. At the end of the day, it just got told a straight no. There comes a point where we must ask, “What more do we have to do to get this case across?”

**Brendan O’Hara:** I absolutely share the right hon. Gentleman’s frustration. It seems that, no matter who we speak to, no matter when we speak to them, and no matter the strength of the case that we put forward, there just seems, historically, to have been absolutely no desire on the part of the Home Office even to see the problems that the inshore fishing industry has, to view it as an exceptional case, and to understand the Department’s responsibility to help these communities and the industry to find a bespoke solution to their problems. We were repeatedly told that, as far as the Home Office was concerned, it was an issue for the fishing industry and was for the fishing industry to sort out.

However, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland have said, does anyone believe that we would willingly continue on this merry-go-round if there were easy, quick-fix solutions to be found, and if there were locally available crews waiting and queuing up to work on the boats? There simply are not. That is why we have come away from every one of those meetings with the distinct impression that the Home Office, rather than wanting to be part of finding a workable solution, sees its role as being there to police the legislation that is already in place.

The hon. Member for Strangford was correct when he said that there is a complete unwillingness on the part of the Home Office to accept that the 12-mile limit on the west coast of Scotland and in Northern Ireland is vastly different from the 12-mile limit on the east coast, and that a blanket one-size-fits-all policy totally ignores the fact that, for smaller fishing boats working out of Oban, Tarbert, Carradale or Campbeltown, the 12-mile limit stretches far out into the dangerous deep waters of the north Atlantic.

We also know that the mainstay of the west coast fleet is the shellfish industry. It has arguably the best langoustine and scallops in the world, which are found in the safer, shallower inshore waters in the Scottish Hebrides. The example given by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland about his fishing communities having to go beyond the uninhabited islands should be remarkable, but maybe in these circumstances it is not. While on the east coast a large fishing fleet can head out to sea outside UK territorial waters relatively quickly, on the west coast we simply cannot. The problem of geography is essentially creating a huge problem for one of the most important sectors of our rural west coast economy. Historically, the Government’s response has been that it is not their problem to find the solution. While I welcome certain things that have been introduced, history and experience tell me that we will not get much further; I hope that the Minister is the one to prove me wrong.

It has already been said that what is being proposed in the skilled worker visa does not create a level playing field at all, as the cost of securing the skilled worker visa is huge. Skippers and owners will have to pay out thousands of pounds getting visas and the ability to bring in workers. While the lowering of the fees and the reduction of the salary threshold are all to be welcomed, as we have heard so often this afternoon, the draconian requirement for applicants to have an English language examination is causing huge problems.

For those recruiting deckhands to work on inshore fishing boats, the demand that every worker achieves level 4, B1 in English showing that they can read, write, speak and understand English is almost ridiculously prohibitive. This is not the first time that that has been raised in the House. Late last year, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke of a skipper in her constituency who brought in a vastly experienced Ghanaian fisherman to work as a deckhand, but he could not get past the B1. He could not get past that English language test, and it made a huge difference to not just him, but the boat owner and everyone else on the crew, because they simply could not go to sea. The Minister will be well aware of the article in *Fishing News* in which the Fishermen’s Welfare Alliance told the paper that

[Brendan O'Hara]

"getting fishermen through the B1 English language requirement is now a big issue."

I know that he will be aware of that, because the hon. Member for Totnes just told him that Crew Services Limited said that of the 325 non-UK crew on its books, only six have that certificate.

Earlier this week, I was in contact with a number of boat owners and skippers in Argyll and Bute. I talked to Malcolm MacKinnon, who owns five vessels in Tarbert. We discussed what the situation on the ground there was, and he told me that because of the chronic shortage of deckhands, his 22-metre fishing boat, *The Elegance*, has been tied up since 9 April. Malcolm employs hugely experienced skippers, and his opinion is that the requirement for deckhands to be able to speak and understand English may well be reasonable, but the demand that they are also able to read and write English to that level is a completely unnecessary hurdle, and utterly disproportionate to the tasks they will be asked to perform while on his boat.

Malcolm pointed out that a tied-up boat does not affect just the skipper, his crew and their families through a loss of income; it has a huge knock-on effect on the local community, where businesses rely heavily on each other in a way that perhaps does not exist in more urban areas. He told me that over a 10-week period, the boat would normally have spent money on 80,000 litres of fuel, 50 tonnes of ice and £3,000 of local groceries and supplies, as well as a supply of gloves, overalls and various other items from the chandlery in the local area. He also told me he was in the process of buying a new vessel, but decided to pull out of the purchase because he knew he could not get the crew.

In Mr McKinnon's opinion, the whole of the west coast of Scotland would probably get by on only 300 foreign crew members. That is the level we are talking about; that is the reality of the situation on the ground in the west coast of Scotland. Mr McKinnon's case cannot and should not ever be seen as being unique, because it is multiplied many times over across the west coast. The impact on already fragile rural communities and their economies is enormous.

All we are asking for is a level playing field—one that does not penalise small fishing communities simply on the basis of their geographic position in these islands. I ask the Minister, after all of the years, after all the meetings and after all the pleas that have been made from across this House, will he be the one to finally break the cycle, so we can get that level playing field for our small, local, rural communities?

2.45 pm

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate, and for his determined and relentless advocacy on an issue that is of the utmost importance to his fishing community and to fishing communities across the whole of the United Kingdom. He has explained that some 600 jobs could be at risk across these areas as a result of problems caused by the end of the transitional arrangements. He has also clearly set out that persistent efforts to reach some accommodation with Ministers to soften the blow of those changes appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

I also thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and the hon. Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for making excellent contributions.

I have a couple of brief points on the principles that underpin the Opposition's approach to the points-based system. First, we support it; it was, in fact, created by a Labour Government in 2008. We believe, however, that it is being mismanaged, and there are real opportunities for improvement. Secondly, migrant workers play a vital role in our economy, but it is clear that the reason employers are having to go abroad is that for 13 years we have seen Governments failing to train Britain's home-grown talent to fill the 1 million vacancies we have. We have 7 million people on NHS waiting lists in England alone. Thirdly, the Labour party wants the net migration number to come down. We want to see our public and private sectors recruit and train more home-grown talent to fill vacancies before looking overseas. That is why we have set out practical plans to deliver a skills agenda that gets people back into the labour market and workforce and brings down NHS waiting times. Those are the three principles that underpin our approach to the issue.

I will now turn to the specific focus of this debate. I was particularly struck by an industry overview published by the Sea Fish Industry Authority last year, which noted:

"Across the supply chain, businesses raised issues with the Skilled Worker Visa route as a solution to labour shortages. This option was seen as prohibitively expensive, especially for small businesses. Businesses also reported that the application system was slow and difficult to use. The high English language requirement for the visa was seen as prohibitive by many businesses. As a result, some industry groups began exploring avenues to recruiting workers from countries where English is an official language, such as Belize."

The Government's position, as set out in section 43 of Nationality and Borders Act 2022, is that foreign nationals require sponsored visas under the points-based system. However, in recognition of the fact that many crews have been incorrectly relying on transit visas rather than work visas, the Government agreed to delay implementation of section 43. Then, on 20 April this year, in response to an urgent question from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, the Home Office confirmed that the six-month delay would not be extended.

We are now in a situation where a number of really important questions need to be answered. I would like to hear from the Minister on the following points. The Government have said that the rules in effect from last month are intended to encourage employers in the fishing industry to recruit locally if possible. Can the Minister tell us what recent assessment he has made of the extent to which the current workforce requirements of the fishing industry have been met by recruiting domestic workers? Secondly, what specific steps are the Government taking to provide the necessary training opportunities for UK nationals to take on skilled jobs on fishing vessels?

Thirdly, during the passage of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who was Immigration Minister at the time, said that the codification of Government policy on visa requirements for fishing vessels in section 43 was likely to have a "negligible" impact. Based on the information now available to the Government, was that a reasonable assumption?

Fourthly, what measures have the Government put in place to monitor the effects of the transition to the new system? Specifically, will Ministers commit to ensuring that there is robust, ongoing analysis of the impact on workforce supply and the UK's food security more broadly?

Fifthly, since the relevant changes came into force last month, how many applications has the Home Office received from employers in the fishing sector for sponsor licences and skilled workers visas? How many of those applications have already been granted and how many are still outstanding?

Sixthly, what does the initial evidence tell us about the degree to which meeting the English language requirements continues to pose particular challenges to would-be visa sponsors?

Seventhly, will the Minister update us on what progress the Government and/or their contractors working overseas have made towards ensuring adequate provision of the requisite English language training for prospective workers in countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and others that Members have highlighted?

A major part of the Government's justification for refusing to extend the transition period is the argument that the English language requirements under the skilled worker route are an important means of protecting migrant workers against abuses in the workplace. Will the Minister therefore explain why his party's manifesto commitment to establish a single enforcement body for labour market abuses remains unfulfilled? Will he also give an unambiguous commitment to fulfilling that manifesto pledge before the next general election?

The fishing industry is a vital part of our economy, our food security and our broader national story. The current system simply is not working, and the Government should get on and fix it.

2.51 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for the constructive meeting that he and I had earlier in the year with representatives from the fishing sector. I am grateful to him and to all other hon. Members who have participated today. I was grateful for a recent meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), which was very productive. He made a number of important points, and in a moment I will respond to him as to how the Government intend to take them forward. I will pass on to the Prime Minister an application from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) to be fishing Minister, although he might have competition from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan.

The Government fully recognise the importance of the fishing industry to the UK's economy. It has played an integral part in the UK's heritage and will play an important part in its future. It is a mainstay of coastal communities. It provides employment, shapes infrastructure, and provides nutritious and delicious food for our domestic and international markets.

In recognition of the important contribution that fishing makes, the Home Secretary and I are of the view that, following the implementation of section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act, which clarifies the long-standing position that migrant workers within 12 nautical

miles of the UK require a work visa, it is vital that the Government do what they can to find further ways to support the fishing sector in using the immigration system.

In the Home Secretary's letter to the sector last month, which has already been referred to, she set out that the Department stands ready to deliver a comprehensive package of support to the sector. The package includes guiding fishing firms through the visa and sponsor application process, as well as the broader immigration system; ensuring that there is sufficient capacity for English language testing slots; expediting visa and sponsor applications; further quickening the decision-making process for no extra charge; and having dedicated points of contact in UK Visas and Immigration for the sector. That is a broad package. It is based on one that we have produced for other sectors in the recent past that has been appreciated by those sectors and has generated dividends.

**Mr Carmichael:** Earlier today in the House, the Minister said that the package had been welcomed by the fishing industry. Who was he talking to who welcomed it?

**Robert Jenrick:** My Department has told me that stakeholders have welcomed it, and I think it is a good package. We are already starting to engage with firms and representatives who are responding to it. The sector is well catered for under the points-based system, but I will come in a moment to the changes that we propose to make. Those in a range of eligible fishing and processing roles—including deckhands, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to earlier—have had access to the skilled worker visa since April 2021.

We believe that with the right level of support, the sector should be able to further navigate the existing immigration system. Building on that, and further to representations from a number of right hon. and hon. Members present, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, we have decided to add further fishing occupations—share fishermen, trawler skippers and deckhands on large fishing vessels—to the shortage occupation list, all of which the Migration Advisory Committee recommended in 2020 as part of its SOL review. That will ensure that the fishing sector can continue to access the talent that it needs at reduced cost, and the Government will implement that during the summer on an interim basis until the wider MAC review into the SOL has been completed.

**Brendan O'Hara:** What exactly is the definition of a large fishing boat?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Member's knowledge of the fishing sector is superior to mine. I do not know the exact definition, but I will happily get my officials to write to him and we will place on record in the Library of the House what the Home Office considers the official definition to be.

We strongly encourage the sector to engage with us to ensure that firms can attract the workers that are needed. The sooner that happens, the less disruption the sector will face. My officials, along with officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stand ready to help. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said—echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan and others—the long-term, sustainable answer is not to rely solely on international labour but

[*Robert Jenrick*]

to train more domestic workers to embrace technology and automation to the extent that that is applicable. We all appreciate the challenges that the sector faces and the difficulty in recruiting domestically at present. Nobody is blind to that, and the Home Secretary and I are certainly not.

On broader non-immigration aspects—this point was raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and others—DEFRA continues to run the access to labour working group that was launched in June 2022 with the purpose of improving relationships with the industry, ensuring that it has a voice at the table, and Home Office officials are represented on that working group. That includes representatives from the catching, processing, aquaculture and shellfish sectors across the United Kingdom. I have encouraged my officials to play an active part in that so that we can have the dialogue that everyone present seeks to achieve.

In terms of helping the sector to recruit and train the next generation of fishermen and women, the Government have provided funding through the £100 million UK seafood fund to remove some of the barriers that new entrants to the sector face, and DEFRA has awarded £1.1 million through the fund for skills and training to help industry with recruitment and retention issues. Seven projects across the UK have received funding to improve the quality of training, promote career progression and help to attract new people into the sector.

**Mr Carmichael:** What help is that to the constituent I referenced who still owes £680,000 to the bank, and who cannot go to sea because he cannot get the crew? He will not be around by the time these people are available for his ship.

**Robert Jenrick:** I appreciate the urgency of the issue, but it is important that the sector plays its part in considering the long-term future of training and recruiting new individuals. The funds provided by DEFRA will play a part in helping the sector to adapt to the future.

In addition to the grant schemes in England, the fisheries and seafood scheme offers extensive support aimed at attracting new entrants. Eligible projects include supporting new entrants into the industry, the creation of job opportunities and the provision of apprenticeship schemes for new entrants, perhaps including the one mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes.

**Mr Carmichael:** Is it the Minister's position today that the same people—the same stakeholders in the industry—who have been telling him that they welcome this somehow or other did not realise they had a responsibility to upskill their own workforce?

**Robert Jenrick:** No, it is not. As with any sector of the economy, there is a role for Government in producing an immigration system that enables access to foreign labour on a pragmatic basis where there are skills shortages. There is also a role for the industry to adapt, evolve and train British workers to take those jobs, and both have to work together in harmony. I have just set out the funding streams available through DEFRA to help support the sector to do that, but I do not underestimate how challenging that will be for the sector.

**Jim Shannon:** I do not think that any of us here do not welcome the training money and the opportunities it will give the sector back home to try to gain employment. I am mindful that that is a challenging target to meet. What we have asked for today—if the Minister is coming to this point, I apologise—is short-term help with the English language requirement. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) put forward the idea that the English qualification should be A2, and I suggested it should be B2. We made it clear that that would be for one year, and then there would be a target to meet the B1 qualification. I felt that that was a positive and constructive way forward, and it helps us as representatives of the fishing sector. I hope the Minister will forgive me if I am labouring the point, but we need such a breakthrough.

**Robert Jenrick:** I was coming to that point. I was not going to conclude my remarks without addressing it properly.

**Anthony Mangnall:** I apologise to the hon. Member for Strangford for jumping in on the back of his question. The funds are welcome, but I urge the Minister to do all he can to encourage DEFRA to see that access to them is made as easy as possible. I am concerned that in my patch, we repeatedly fail to apply for the funds. There are certain levels of complexity that I do not think are necessary when we are trying to help the industry. It is becoming quite cumbersome, so perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will relay that to his counterpart.

**Robert Jenrick:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that ask, and I will certainly relay the feedback to the Secretary of State for DEFRA.

I will turn to the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and then I will come to the ask of the hon. Member for Strangford. As the Home Secretary set out in her letter to the industry, although it is a long-standing Government policy that overseas workers in UK waters needed visas, we accepted that there was a need to legislate for clarity. The fishing sector has been using transit visas erroneously, in our view, for a number of years without consequence, and it was vital to correct that given the labour abuse that we saw in some parts of the sector.

Foreign nationals coming to work in the UK, on land or on our waters, should comply with the immigration system. That includes the firms that are looking to hire those workers. I do not believe that is controversial, and the fishing industry is no exception. None the less, as a result of the clarification there is a transition that needs to be managed, as right hon. and hon. Members have said today.

**David Duguid:** I do not think anybody in this Chamber today would disagree on the need to avoid labour abuse. But would the Department—I understand that if there are ongoing investigations, this is not appropriate—provide details of any convictions of labour abuse that have taken place? Perhaps not today, but will he inform Members of where abuses have taken place? I am not aware of any in my constituency, but if I was, I and other hon. Members would be helping the Government to throw the book at those people. I suspect it is not as prevalent as some in the media might want to make out.

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not want to overstate it, but I know from my conversations with officials in the Department that they believe there is evidence of abuse. If I am able to put any of that in the public domain to give a guide on the scale of it, I would be pleased to.

Section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act simply clarifies what has been the Government's policy position for some time, which is that foreign workers working in our waters need permission to do so. It does not introduce a new policy.

**Mr Carmichael:** Why did the Minister include Sule Skerry within the definition of waters to which the Act applies?

**Robert Jenrick:** I was interested to hear the point that the right hon. Gentleman made in his speech. As I understand it, the Home Office has simply taken the standard definition of 12 nautical miles, and all islands that fall within UK waters are in scope of the UK's immigration system. It is not within the power of the Home Office to change where UK waters begin and end. If he contests that or would like to further discuss the matter, I would be happy to take it up with him.

**Mr Carmichael:** It is in our interests to try to polish this particular item, because it could make a real difference. Sule Skerry is about 90 or 100 miles out from Orkney mainland. Those waters are very different from the ones we are talking about. Boats often go there, and they rely on it for shelter. Including places such as Sule Skerry will put lives at risk. Is the Minister happy with that?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be happy to make further inquiries and come back to the right hon. Gentleman. As I understand it, 12 nautical miles merely represents the standard definition of UK waters. If that is the case, it seems difficult to hive off particular parts of UK waters for the purposes of our immigration system. I am happy to be corrected if that is not an accurate description.

**Brendan O'Hara:** I appreciate that the Minister is being very generous. It is not about carving out certain parts of UK territorial waters. This affects the entire west coast—certainly of Scotland—and it takes in all of Northern Ireland and large chunks of England. It is not a small tweak that is required, but a complete change in our understanding of what the 12 nautical miles means for both the west coast and the east coast. This is not a tinkering point.

**Robert Jenrick:** I understand that, and I apologise if I gave the impression that this affects a small part of UK waters. Either way, the Home Office has taken a standard definition of UK waters and applied it for the purposes of our immigration system. Ostensibly, that sounds like a reasonable way to proceed, but I am happy to make further inquiries and revert to the hon. Gentleman if there is another way to do so within the confines of the law.

**David Duguid:** I suspect that the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) equally refers to somewhere such as Rockall. I do not think it is in anybody's constituency, but it is so far away from the UK mainland that we think it should not

apply. However, under the definition of the 12 nautical miles, the 12 nautical miles around Rockall—which is not inhabited—are impacted as well.

**Robert Jenrick:** I am grateful for that. The point is registered. I will make inquiries and revert to all hon. Members present who are interested.

I turn to the point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford about English language requirements. In our 2019 manifesto, we committed to prioritising people who have a good grasp of English in our visa system. The English language requirement is fundamental to successful integration into British society, helping visa holders to participate in community life and work. As the hon. Member noted, the level we set is B1, or lower intermediate English, from the common European framework of reference for languages. That level of English is applied for skilled worker visas without exception, unless the applicant can prove that they are from a majority English-speaking country, of which there are some that provide fishermen and women to UK businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said that workers from Belize, which is an English-speaking country, come to the UK in some numbers. That level is not fluency, but it is the ability to understand and deal with the main points likely to arise in conversation on matters relating to work, school, leisure and so on. Without that level, applicants may struggle to support themselves and their families in the UK.

A good grasp of English can also be important in the workplace, particularly in busy or potentially dangerous environments, and to fulfil health and safety requirements. Workers who do not have a good command of English are more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation and less able to understand their rights. That is vital in a sector that, as we have just noted, has had some issues with labour market abuses.

**Stephen Kinnock:** On labour market abuses, will the Minister set out the timeline for his Government's implementation of their manifesto pledge to create a single integrated labour market enforcement authority?

**Robert Jenrick:** We do not have a timetable at present, but we are working with the relevant stakeholders, such as the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, which deals with abuses onshore, rather than offshore, to find the right approach to protect workers in all settings. I am happy to update the hon. Gentleman further on the likely timescales for that.

I would be happy to consider the proposal of the hon. Member for Strangford, which he set out well, although I do not want to give false hope that we are certain to take it forward. For the reasons I set out, we have principled arguments for maintaining a good degree of English. All of us, including the hon. Gentleman, care about preventing exploitation. We want the people who come to this country to speak a good degree of English, and we want to ensure that we have a well-integrated and cohesive country. As a matter of principle, we have taken the view that all those coming on skilled worker visas should have that level of English.

I appreciate that, in this instance, a high number of those coming for such purposes will ultimately return to their own countries, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan said. None the less, it is a route to

[*Robert Jenrick*]

settlement, and we have to be very careful about enabling people to live in the UK for sustained periods or settle here permanently if they cannot participate fully in life in this country.

**Jim Shannon:** If I heard the Minister right, I believe the Department was prepared to consider A2. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan and I—indeed, all hon. Members who know fishing organisations—know that they are satisfied that A2, which is a lesser requirement, meets their safety requirements. It gives those people the level of understanding that the Government wish them to have. If that is the case, I suggest that the A2 qualification would be sufficient to move us forward in a constructive and positive way.

You are a very knowledgeable lady when it comes to fishing issues, Mrs Murray. You are not participating in this debate, of course, but I just want to make that point. In the past five years, I cannot recollect any abuses of fishermen. I am aware of that happening in Northern Ireland about 20 years ago, but the fishing organisations have moved forward because they want to ensure the safety and security of their fishermen and safeguard their rights. That is a positive policy, and I welcome that.

**Robert Jenrick:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. I assure him that I will take that request away and give it careful consideration. If there is any further information that he or the representative bodies would like to submit to us, I would be happy to consider that. But I think he understands the principles on which the decision is taken and that it is not an easy decision to give special treatment to one particular sector when others in the country would like similar treatment. Our overall policy is the right one. We want people to have a good degree of English if they are coming here for sustained periods or on a route to settlement.

I would like to update hon. Members following the conversation I had with my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan. He asked for two particular Home Office considerations. First, he asked whether the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which, as he noted, we have extended into 2024 and increased to up to 55,000 workers, could be extended to include certain fishing occupations that are undertaken onshore and that could be construed to be seasonal in nature. I undertook that we would consider that. My hon. Friend undertook that he and the sector would build an evidence base to support and inform the decision by the Home Office.

Secondly, my hon. Friend asked whether the package of support set out by the Home Secretary to enable easier access to the skilled worker visa system could be extended to certain onshore activities. Again, I undertook to look into that. I will revert to him and other right hon. and hon. Members once we have taken those issues forward. If other Members or representatives from the sector who might be listening to the debate want to participate in informing those decisions, I encourage them to do so.

**Mr Carmichael:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—although we still have an hour and a quarter. He has been generous with his time so far. The hon. Member for Strangford can still take time at the end of the debate, as I recall.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines), told me on 20 April that she would pass on my request for a meeting. That request was to meet not just me, but fishing organisations as well. I do not know whether that maybe slipped her mind, or if there are other bases on which meetings are offered. Will the Minister meet me, other hon. Members who have an interest and fishing organisations, to hear from them, in early course? Those organisations may be different from the stakeholders who have given him the views that seem to inform his thinking today.

All joking apart, this really matters. It is having a massive impact on some of the most economically fragile communities in this country.

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be pleased to meet the right hon. Gentleman and his constituents. I have met the hon. Member for Strangford and representatives from the Northern Irish fishing sector, and I met my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan. That is a decent number—I have met two out of the four Members here. I would be pleased to do the same for the right hon. Gentleman.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing the debate, and all those who have spoken. I hope I have made clear that the Government are committed to supporting the fishing sector as much as we can. On top of the already good coverage that our immigration system has of the fishing sector, I hope that the additional support that the Home Secretary and I have brought forward in the last few weeks, both in the package to assist with navigating the skilled worker visa system and now the additional occupations added to the shortage occupation list, will further improve the situation.

I hope Members will assist the Government in encouraging full engagement with our offer of support, which in turn should enable the industry to make full use of the system. The sooner that engagement happens, the less disruption there will be. I look forward to working with the sector in the future.

3.19 pm

**Jim Shannon:** First of all, I thank all the Members here today for their significant contributions to the debate, starting with the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). He and I seem to be in many debates together. We are always in fishing debates, as indeed, I think, are all of us who are here now.

The hon. Member for Totnes referred to the training scheme for locals. That is a very important issue and the Minister responded to it well. It involves the fishermen's apprenticeship scheme, which I know the hon. Gentleman has spoken about before, in Westminster Hall and elsewhere. It also relates to the processing sector, which can help to grow the economy of the United Kingdom, and that is good news.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) brings a wealth of knowledge to these debates and I genuinely always look forward to hearing his contributions. He told us that a third of the economic sector in his constituency is dependent on fishing, which shows how important it is locally. He referred to transit visas and said that fishing is critical for the future of our economy.

There was a request about the English language test. That might be a small part of the changes that we need, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to, but those changes will be critical for moving us forward. Minister, we want to move forward with you; that is what we are saying. But we need help to get that issue over the line.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and I have also become good friends during his time here. Fishing brings us together—indeed, many other things do. The Union brings us together; we are interested in that. Today, he again outlined the importance of fishing to his constituency. He also said—I loved this—that “green shoots” need to be encouraged. The “green shoots” are there. We just need to take a wee step forward in the right direction to get things over the line.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the Fishermen’s Welfare Alliance and to what it is saying. I think that from today onwards we will probably take some of these organisations together on the basis of this debate and use their work to add to our comments, because that would be helpful. The POs that we all have in our constituencies can do that as well.

I always appreciate the contributions of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). He was very clear in supporting the key issues of what we are about: the English language test; reducing the requirement from B1 to B2; and safety. All those things would all be retained, which is really important. He also made another important point: while we are focusing on the fishing vessels out in the sea, the industry back in the harbours, the processing sector, the shops, the diesel sellers and—very importantly—the families, are all involved, too.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), made a significant contribution. He asked all the right questions without going through all the fishing noise that we all have, and I thank him for it. Indeed, we all thank him for that, because I think he summed things up very succinctly for us all.

I very much appreciate the Minister’s response to the debate. I also appreciate the fishing package, and the aim in the future to have the treaty in place. All of us across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland would get the advantage of that. He knows the key issue and I welcome his commitment to look at it again. To help him and his Department to understand all the issues better, the key issue is that the B2 qualification is in safety and in understanding. The industry and the sector are really committed to working together with him.

This is a joint enterprise for the betterment of all the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I think we can go forward together and I thank everyone for their constructive and positive contributions today. Finally, Mrs Murray, it is always nice to see you in the Chair. For once, you were able to oversee a debate rather than participating in it. Thank you so much for chairing today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered visa arrangements for inshore industry fishing crew.

3.23 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 25 May 2023

## CABINET OFFICE

### Contingent Liabilities: Liquidations of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group Ltd

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin):** I am pleased to report that, following the compulsory liquidations of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group Ltd, His Majesty's Government have successfully enabled the continuity of public services. On 26 October 2022, I laid a departmental minute to notify the House of two contingent liabilities incurred by the Cabinet Office: to indemnify the official receiver for any costs and expenses incurred by him in carrying out the proper performance of his duties as liquidator of UKCloud Ltd and its parent company, Virtual Infrastructure Group Ltd; and an indemnity for any claims made against him in respect of the same. This was followed by written statements from myself and Baroness Neville-Rolfe in each of our respective Houses.

At the time of the statements, it was not possible to reliably estimate the size or maturity of either contingent liability.

In respect of costs incurred, the official receiver now expects the peak funding requirement of the liquidations to be £20 million and the liquidation to conclude in the first half of 2024.

In respect of the claims indemnity provided to the official receiver, I would like to assure the House that the official receiver has not been notified of any potential claims that may require a call on the indemnity, and that all UKCloud Ltd customers have now successfully migrated their services on to alternative platforms with no unexpected disruptions to public services. As such, it is deemed unlikely any claims on the indemnity will be made post-liquidation. We therefore assess that it is unlikely that there will be any cost to the public purse as a result of this contingent liability.

[HCWS810]

## EDUCATION

### Level 3 Qualifications Review

**The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon):** Today I am announcing an update to phase 2 of the Government's reforms to post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England, removing funding from technical qualifications that overlap with T-levels. We are publishing a provisional list, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wave-3-t-levels-overlapping-qualifications>

of 92 technical qualifications that have been assessed to overlap with wave 3 T-levels in business and administration; engineering and manufacturing; and finance and accounting.

The assessment of overlapping qualifications is carried out by independent assessors, who carry out in-depth reviews of qualifications. This is the same process as for

waves 1 and 2 T-levels. Subject to the outcomes of an appeal process which gives awarding organisations the opportunity to contest a qualification's placement on the list, we will withdraw public funding at 16 to 19 from these qualifications for new starts from August 2025. On the provisional list of 92 qualifications, we know there were 36 qualifications which had no enrolments and a further 24 which had fewer than 100 enrolments in 2020-21 academic year, highlighting the need to streamline the qualifications system. The final overlap list for wave 3 T-levels will be published in the autumn.

We are reforming technical qualifications at level 3 as the current qualifications do not consistently progress young people to related employment. In the future technical qualifications will be based on the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's occupational standards, which have been designed by employers and which set out the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that employers need.

Removing funding from technical qualifications which overlap with T-levels will ensure young people can feel confident that they are studying technical qualifications which will prepare them for jobs in their chosen occupation. The breadth and depth of T-levels is unmatched, giving students a thorough understanding of the sector and the skills needed to work in specific occupations, as well as an industry placement which gives them valuable experience.

T-levels are being scaled up in a managed roll-out, with 16 subjects currently available at over 160 providers across England, with 24 T-levels in total planned by 2025. We are continuing to build on the success of T-levels and have put in place extra measures to support providers, employers and students. We are providing a 10% uplift in funding to providers delivering T-levels for the 2023-24 academic year, a new £12 million employer support fund and extra funding for providers to provide careers guidance on T-levels. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation is also supporting providers as they make the move to T-levels. This includes a new technical education networks programme to offer subject-specific support for T-level teaching, and providing grant funding to the Baker Dearing Educational Trust to support UTCs in their transition to T-levels.

We are supporting more learners to access T-levels through the T-level transition programme. This is a high-quality, holistic study programme for learners who would benefit from the additional study time and preparation that it will give them before they start their T-level. Learners on the programme develop a broad range of knowledge, skills and behaviours to prepare them for T-levels. This includes the national technical content developed for the programme, through which learners gain industry-relevant technical knowledge and practical skills aligned to T-levels, as well as gaining valuable work experience and preparation for the workplace, English, maths and digital skills, developing their study skills and wider personal development. In total, close to 9,800 students have enrolled on the programme in the first three years, since 2020, and provisional estimates show that about 49% of the first cohort subsequently progressed onto level 3 or higher outcomes.

The removal of public funding from qualifications that overlap with T-levels at 16 to 19 forms a small part of our wider technical education reforms. Our new integrated funding approval process means that from 2025, awarding organisations can develop and submit

new technical qualifications for funding, which are based on occupational standards approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

Awarding organisations with qualifications on the wave 3 overlap list have been notified, as have the Federation of Awarding Bodies and Joint Council for Qualifications.

[HCWS808]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Rock Review of Agricultural Tenancies: Government Response

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** I am repeating the statement made yesterday by my noble friend the Minister, Lord Benyon.

Following the UK Farm to Fork summit last week, the Government have today set out its next steps to support tenant farmers who are at the heart of our rural economy. The Government supports tenant farmers because there is no better way to bring new people into the sector.

We are today publishing the Government response to the Rock Review of tenant farming in England. From day one of the agricultural transition, we have worked with tenant farmers as we co-designed our farming schemes, utilising their knowledge and experience. This is the next step, alongside significant work to date, to support farmers in all corners of the country to produce world class food, while protecting the environment. The Government supports tenant farming, because it is one of the best routes to bring new people into the sector.

I would like to thank Baroness Rock and the tenancy working group for their time and dedication in producing the review. Recognising how critical the tenanted sector is to a successful agricultural transition, we commissioned the group, chaired by Baroness Rock, to carry out a comprehensive review of tenant farming in England.

Today's response builds on the considerable progress that we have made since the review was commissioned to implement their ongoing feedback. For example, we have designed the sustainable farming incentive (SFI) to be as accessible as possible to tenants, with the addition of six new standards in 2023 and shorter agreements. Further, half of the 22 landscape recovery projects selected in the first round involve tenants and we are delivering the aims of the local nature recovery (LNR) scheme by evolving countryside stewardship (CS) instead of building an entirely new scheme.

As announced at Budget 2023, we launched a consultation on extending inheritance tax relief.

We have opened a call for evidence on the taxation of ecosystem service markets to understand the commercial operations and the areas of uncertainty in respect of taxation.

We have also published the "Nature Markets Framework", which provides greater clarity on the principles that will guide the development of UK market mechanisms for carbon and other ecosystem services and set out next steps including arrangements to develop a suite of investment standards for nature markets. These consultations, combined with the Nature Markets Framework, should give tenants and landlords more confidence to invest in and securely access payments from these new markets, opening up new revenue streams for the sector.

We strongly agree with the review that tenant farmers should be able to access farm offers; make their essential contribution to restoring the natural environment; and produce food for the nation. We are therefore taking forward the majority of Baroness Rock's recommendations and setting out the next steps to implement them today.

Today we are announcing a new farm tenancy forum to put in place more formal engagement and feedback structures between Defra and the tenanted sector. This will allow the tenanted sector to work with us, to provide regular feedback on trends in tenant/landlord agreements and report any emerging issues that may need addressing, effectively monitor trends in landlord-tenant

relationships. We are inviting industry organisations who represent tenant farmers, agricultural landlords and professional advisors who work in the sector to be members of this group. The forum will support the implementation of the Government response to the Rock Review, feeding back real-world experience and insight on progress. Terms of reference for the group has been published alongside this Government response.

We will be launching a call for evidence this summer to explore the proposal for a tenant farming commissioner in England in more detail. This will examine the benefits and impacts of how a tenant farming commissioner might work in practice and how the role would fit within existing procedures and regulations.

We agree with the review that the tenanted sector has an essential role as a route into farming for new entrants. We will work to embed the views of the tenanted sector in the development of our new entrant support scheme, working closely with the new tenant farming forum.

Our response sets out the significant progress we have made to ensure our new farming schemes work for every type of farmer. We are supporting those with shorter tenancies or where there is a change of land manager/owner by removing penalties and increasing flexibility in agreement lengths, where it still provides value for taxpayer money. We are also introducing a requirement in countryside stewardship for landlords to engage with their tenant prior to applying in order to obtain their support.

The legacy of the review will mean that tenant concerns are heard and addressed through our policies and schemes, and we will continue to engage with the forum and the wider sector as we implement its recommendations and move through the agricultural transition.

[HCWS806]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Hong Kong Six-monthly Report

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly):** The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong was published today. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2022. The report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/six-monthly-reports-on-hong-kong>.

I commend the report to the House.

[HCWS812]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Delivering for Patients

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** I refer hon. Members to the oral statements I will make in the House today, 25 May 2023, on patient choice and new hospitals.

[HCWS811]

## JUSTICE

### Government Response to Legal Aid Means Test Review

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer):** The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my noble Friend Lord Bellamy KC, has made the following written statement:

Legal aid is fundamental to a fair justice system and underpins the rule of law. It ensures equality of arms, so that people can access justice and enforce their legal rights. Means testing is a crucial component of the justice system as it ensures those on lower incomes receive help with paying their legal costs, and that those who can afford to contribute towards their legal costs do so.

The Government have today published its response to the consultation which reviewed the entire system of legal aid means testing. The comprehensive suite of changes we will now be implementing to civil and criminal legal aid means tests will significantly widen eligibility for legal aid and ensure continued access to justice.

Changes we will be making include:

Increasing income and capital thresholds for legal aid eligibility, so they better reflect essential living costs and different household compositions. This means that 3.5 million more people will be eligible for criminal legal aid in the magistrates court and 2.5 million more people will be eligible for civil legal aid.

Introducing a £500 per month earnings threshold for applicants in receipt of universal credit. If exceeded, applicants will need to complete a full income assessment in the same manner as applicants not in receipt of benefits. This replaces the interim position adopted in 2013, when universal credit roll-out began. This policy is designed to deliver fair eligibility according to applicants' means, regardless of the source of those means.

Removing the upper income threshold for legal aid at the Crown court, meaning that all Crown court defendants will be eligible for legal aid. Those on higher incomes will be asked to pay more towards to their legal aid, ensuring taxpayer resources are directed at those most in need.

Excluding assets such as the family home from the means test where they are the subject matter of the case or where coercive control has denied applicants use of their shared marital assets, making it easier for domestic abuse victims to access legal aid.

Removing the means test for three areas of civil legal aid: civil representation for under-18s, civil representation for parents or those with parental responsibility facing the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment from their child, and legal help for inquests involving a potential breach of rights under the ECHR (within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998) or where there is likely to be a significant wider public interest in the individual being represented at the inquest.

The MTR will be implemented in phases. Phase 1 will deliver changes to non-means tested areas. The rest of the new civil means test will be implemented in phase 2, followed by the new criminal means tests in phases 3 and 4. Changes to the regulations will be laid in 2023-24, coming into force in 2025. This timeframe allows digital build and testing of the new assessments by the legal aid agency and legal aid providers.

This has been an open and collaborative review and we are grateful for the invaluable contribution of a wide range of interested parties throughout the consultation period and during the course of the review.

[HCWS809]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Woking Borough Council Intervention and Tees Valley Independent Review

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** I would like to update the House on action the Government are taking in relation to two local authorities. In the case of Woking Council, Government are taking decisive action

given clear evidence that the best interest of taxpayers is not being served. In the case of Tees Valley Combined Authority, in response to a request from the Mayor, the Secretary of State has decided on an exceptional basis to commission an external assurance review.

#### *Woking Borough Council*

Woking Borough Council is a small district that has engaged in commercial investment activities since 2016. As a result of this, as of December 2022 the council had debts of £1.9 billion, with plans to increase it to almost £2.4 billion by 2024-25, and now faces significant impairments against key assets. This makes Woking the most indebted council in England compared to its financial size, with a net budget of £24 million and core spending power of £14 million. In its most recent budget report Woking Borough Council recognises that this debt, and the council's reliance on commercial income to fund services, places it in an extremely challenging financial position. The Department considers that this is, based on current evidence, the most challenging financial position of any local authority in England.

The Government is introducing new powers through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill that will allow direct intervention where authorities are exposed to excessive risk from borrowing and investment practices. Ahead of that, since May last year, we have been engaging with Woking, given that it is likely to fall within scope of those powers. As a result of our engagement, the Department has been increasingly concerned about the level of risk the council is carrying and how that is being managed.

#### *External assurance review*

As a result of the Department's concern about the specific situation in Woking, in January 2023 the Department commissioned an external assurance review covering the council's governance, finance and commercial issues. This review was carried out by Jim Taylor, Carol Culley OBE and Mervyn Greer, with fieldwork taking place over January and February. The review team was asked to provide an external assessment of Woking's governance arrangements, financial situation, commercial investments and their capacity and capability to manage these in the immediate and longer-term.

The council made the Department aware of further developments in its commercial and finance arrangements in April 2023, following which the Department requested that the review team undertake further fieldwork in April and May. The resulting report reflects all review work undertaken from January to May 2023 and will be published on gov.uk, and copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. This report has been redacted in places in light of the commercially sensitive nature of some of its contents. The full report, including the commercially sensitive information, has been considered by the Secretary of State in taking his decisions in relation to Woking.

#### *Failure to comply with best value duty*

Evidence within the review shows that Woking Borough Council is failing to comply with its best value duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, as required by the Local Government Act 1999. The financial challenge is acute, and the review has concluded that the Council cannot become financially self-sustaining without considerable Government support.

To quote the review:

“The scale of this issue is unprecedented.”

“From the historic base, the sheer scale and complexity of the investment and commercial activity of the council, means that the Council will never have the capacity to effectively manage all the commercial and economic considerations...”

“Commercially, the council is overstretched and remains reliant on further support in the form of additional skills and capacity to continue to find a resolvable solution to its commercial position.”

“There is no realistic route to the Council returning to financial sustainability alone... The Council will need to undertake significant service transformation and consider their future operating model.”

“The new leadership of the Council is taking the right steps. However, it does not have the capacity or capability to address a challenge of this scale without additional support...on the current trajectory the Council will not rectify these issues itself and will continue to fail its best value duty. The Council will require significant support, including statutory oversight.”

“There are critical decisions that need to be taken in the next 2-3 months, for which immediate expert support is required.”

“...the financial issues are more severe and immediate than initially thought [when undertaking work in January and February]”

“...This leads to the conclusion that, despite many initiatives and advice being actioned there is no overarching strategy for the whole situation under the council’s control.”

In addition to the work of the reviewers, the Department has had direct engagement with Woking Borough Council in relation to its financial situation. It is the Department’s view that the council has failed to provide assurance that it is taking the necessary actions to comply with its best value duty and address the serious issues noted in the review. Nor has it given the Department assurance that it has capacity to take the necessary action, or develop an adequate strategy to resolve the situation, when considering the scale and pace of the response required.

The council is aware of the gravity of the situation and has made clear in published papers for its meeting on 23 February 2023 that it is at risk of issuing a section 114 notice, with public statements attributing this to issues relating to shortfalls in commercial income and cost pressures.

#### *Statutory intervention in Woking*

The Secretary of State is satisfied that Woking Borough Council is failing to comply with its best value duty. The Secretary of State considers it necessary to put in place an intervention package immediately, to secure the council’s future and sustainable compliance with its best value duty. The intervention will consist of the appointment of commissioners to oversee specific functions of the council, alongside directions to the council. The Secretary of State is confident that this package will address the failings identified, and is necessary for the council to secure compliance with its best value duty.

It is the Secretary of State’s view that the situation in Woking is sufficiently urgent to justify forgoing the usual period of representation. He considers that there is a pressing case for urgent Government action to protect the interests of the residents and taxpayers of Woking, and the public purse. The scale of Woking’s financial challenges is unprecedented, and we have serious concerns about its commercial arrangements; the Secretary of State is concerned that further evidence of failure

could come to light imminently and require further immediate action. The appointment of commissioners and the directions set out below will therefore take effect from today.

#### *Appointment of commissioners*

The Secretary of State is appointing the following individuals as commissioners to exercise certain functions as required:

**Jim Taylor (Lead Commissioner).** Jim is an ex-chief executive officer of three metropolitan borough local authorities and was appointed in March 2022 by the Secretary of State as a commissioner at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council. He also conducted a governance review of Slough Borough Council for the Secretary of State in 2021.

**Carol Culley OBE.** Carol is the current deputy chief executive and section 151 officer at Manchester City Council. She is CIPFA Junior Vice President, a member of the CIPFA Council and Chair of the CIPFA Public Financial Board; and

**Mervyn Greer.** Mervyn is a Crown Representative at the Cabinet Office where, amongst other responsibilities for strategic suppliers to HMG, he is the appointed Crown Representative for Local Government Commercial and the LGA. His background is in property and built asset management in the private sector, where he was responsible for major outsourcing and property related commercial contracts. He retired from the private sector in 2016. He was a member of the team which conducted the statutory best value inspection of Liverpool City Council in 2021.

The Secretary of State has taken the unusual step of appointing the three individuals who carried out the external assurance review as commissioners. This reflects the acute situation in Woking, and the urgent need for commissioners to begin work immediately to ensure that the council takes steps to secure compliance with their best value duty. The Secretary of State considers that these individuals are best placed to take up these roles in the immediate term, due not only to the knowledge acquired during their time reviewing the council, but to their individual knowledge and experience in local authority leadership, governance, and commercial development. Our understanding of the situation in Woking is likely to change throughout the period of intervention. Their appointments are therefore for 12 months and will be reviewed within six months or at such a time as the Secretary of State determines necessary.

The scale of the financial challenge in Woking means that the council must take immediate steps to address its commercial and financial challenges, and to make transformative change across its entire operations. The commissioners will therefore exercise the following functions:

those associated with the source of Woking’s failures, financial governance and decision making, commercial decision making and management of commercial projects, regeneration and property;

those where the council will need to make changes as a result of these failures, functions associated with the council’s operating model and service redesign to achieve value for money and financial sustainability; and

those that will ensure the council has the right skills and structures to make ongoing improvements across the entire organisation, governance and scrutiny of strategic decisions; and the appointment, dismissal and performance management for senior and statutory officer positions.

#### *Directions to Woking Borough Council*

Alongside this, Woking Borough Council will be directed to prepare and agree an improvement and recovery plan to the satisfaction of commissioners. This must include, as a minimum, plans to:

achieve financial sustainability and reduce debt;  
 ensure value for money when exiting commercial arrangements;  
 ensure compliance with financial management rules and guidance;  
 reconfigure services; and  
 ensure the Council has the necessary skills, capabilities and capacity to carry out this work  
 and achieve compliance with their best value duty.

As with other interventions led by the Department, the council is directed to meet the costs of the commissioners. The fees paid to individuals are published in appointment letters which are available separately on gov.uk. I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise that is being brought, and the scale of the challenge in councils requiring statutory intervention.

The Government are committed to making sure the residents of Woking have what they need from their local council, including confidence in its service delivery, financial management and governance.

I will publish the directions and explanatory memorandum associated with this announcement on gov.uk, and place copies in the libraries of both Houses.

#### *Independent review: Teesworks*

Yesterday, the Secretary of State confirmed that he has made the exceptional decision to support the commissioning of an independent review to consider the specific allegations made, and Tees Valley Combined Authority's oversight of the South Tees Development Corporation (STDC) and Teesworks joint venture.

The Tees Valley Mayor approached Government some time ago regarding the possibility of an independent review of STDC and Teesworks. He raised concerns regarding the allegations made in Parliament by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) of "dubious dealings" and "industrial-scale corruption". The Mayor was, understandably, particularly concerned about the damaging effects that these allegations could have on investment and job creation across Teesside.

My colleague, the Minister for Levelling Up, explained in her letter of 17 May to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough that the Department has so far seen no evidence of corruption, wrongdoing, or illegality. This is still the case.

The Secretary of State's decision has been taken in response to Mayor Houchen's previous request for an independent review to address these allegations and reflects his recognition that the continued allegations of "corruption" poses a real risk to the shared ambitions to deliver jobs and economic growth in Teesside.

In line with established practice, a review panel will be appointed by the Secretary of State to undertake the independent, external assurance review. The members of the panel will be announced shortly as will detailed terms of reference. Since serious allegations of corruption, wrongdoing and illegality have been made, I will ask the panel to address these accusations directly, and to report on the governance arrangements at STDC including how decisions are made, as well as looking at the value achieved for the investment of public money on the site.

The Secretary of State yesterday wrote to the Tees Valley Mayor explaining his decision, a copy of his letter has been placed in the Library of the House of Commons. He also wrote to the Chairs of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Business and Trade Committees, and to the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Any interested party, including Members of Parliament, will be invited to make representations to the panel as part of their evidence gathering. The report and any recommendations will of course be published in line with usual practice.

[HCWS813]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Health Transformation Programme

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** I would like to update the House on the outcome of the procurement of new health and disability benefit assessment contracts—the Functional Assessment Services contracts—for the period 2024 to 2029. These important new contracts have been subject to a rigorous and competitive process in line with public contract regulations.

In the health and disability White Paper published in March, I set out the actions this Government will take to ensure disabled people, and people with health conditions, can lead independent lives and fulfil their potential: first, by reforming the benefits system for the future so it focuses on what people can do, rather than on what they cannot; secondly, by investing in our employment offer to help more disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay and succeed in work; and thirdly, by ensuring people can access the right support at the right time and have a better overall experience when applying for, and receiving, health and disability benefits.

To support these important commitments, the Health Transformation Programme is modernising benefit services to vastly improve the claimant experience, build trust in our services and the decisions we make, and create a more efficient service for taxpayers. As part of this, the programme will deliver improvements I announced through the White Paper.

The Health Transformation Programme is developing a new Health Assessment Service and transforming the entire Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Service, over the longer term. The Health Assessment Service is being developed on a small scale initially and will gradually replace the different services we and our assessment providers use to undertake health assessments across all benefits. It will be fully integrated with other systems, including the transformed PIP Service, with the aim of creating a much-improved experience for people who apply for support. The Functional Assessment Services contracts will provide the foundation for the new Health Assessment Service, replacing the separate contracts for health and disability assessment services and PIP assessments with single contracts for all assessments in a geographic area. The contracts will ensure continuity of service for claimants while we safely develop the new Health Assessment Service and provide the flexibility to introduce it gradually before we roll it out nationally from 2029.

We have informed bidders that the successful bidders in each geographic lot are as follows:

- Lot 1 (North England and Scotland): Maximus UK Services Limited
- Lot 2 (Midlands and Wales): Capita Business Services Limited

Lot 4 (South East England, London and East Anglia):  
Ingeus UK Limited

Lot 5 (Northern Ireland): Capita Business Services Limited

Procurement activity in Lot 3 (South West England) is continuing and we will announce the outcome in due course.

We will work with providers to ensure that the transition to the new service is as smooth as possible. We will also work with the Functional Assessment Services providers

to deliver structural reform, removing the work capability assessment via a phased approach over the lifetime of the contracts, as announced in the White Paper.

This represents a positive step forward in delivering our ambitions for disabled people and people with health conditions. It shows that this Government are committed to delivering a more effective health and disability system for people now and in the future.

[HCWS807]

# Ministerial Correction

*Thursday 25 May 2023*

## PRIME MINISTER

### Engagements

*The following is an extract from Prime Minister's questions on 24 May 2023.*

**Mrs Hodgson:** Does the Prime Minister agree with his friend the Tees Valley Mayor that the National Audit Office must investigate the Teesworks affair? Will the Prime Minister share details of all conversations he has had on the subject with his former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), and the current Levelling Up Minister, given that they have all received donations from Ian Waller, one of the project backers?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Levelling Up Secretary has already announced an investigation into this matter. This is just the same old, same old—*[Interruption.]* It is the same old bunk from Labour. That is all we get. After years of neglect, it is the Conservatives who are delivering for Teesside.

*[Official Report, 24 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 281.]*

*Letter of correction from the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak):*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

The correct response should have been:

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Levelling Up Secretary **is today announcing** an investigation into this matter. This is just the same old, same old—*[Interruption.]* It is the same old bunk from Labour. That is all we get. After years of neglect, it is the Conservatives who are delivering for Teesside.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 25 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>ATTORNEY GENERAL</b> .....	422	<b>ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—</b>	
Domestic Abuse Prosecutions.....	427	<i>continued</i>	
Financial Services Sector: Corruption.....	428	Bathing Waters.....	412
Illegal Migration Bill: Trafficking Convention.....	425	Cost of Food.....	417
Lord Chancellor and Law Officers.....	429	Food Price Inflation: Food Bank Use.....	417
Serious Fraud Office.....	426	Food Prices in Supermarkets.....	410
Serious Fraud Office Reviews.....	428	Fresh Food and Drinks: Duty and Customs.....	411
Serious Violent Crime Prosecutions.....	422	Nature Loss.....	409
Violence against Women and Girls.....	424	Species Decline.....	415
		Topical Questions.....	418
<b>ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL</b>		Waste Incineration.....	414
<b>AFFAIRS</b> .....	409		
Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.....	416		

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 25 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>CABINET OFFICE</b> .....	23WS	<b>HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE</b> .....	26WS
Contingent Liabilities: Liquidations of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group Ltd.....	23WS	Delivering for Patients.....	26WS
<b>EDUCATION</b> .....	23WS	<b>JUSTICE</b> .....	26WS
Level 3 Qualifications Review.....	23WS	Government Response to Legal Aid Means Test Review.....	26WS
<b>ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS</b> .....	25WS	<b>LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES</b> .....	27WS
Rock Review of Agricultural Tenancies: Government Response.....	25WS	Woking Borough Council Intervention and Tees Valley Independent Review.....	27WS
<b>FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE</b> .....	26WS	<b>WORK AND PENSIONS</b> .....	32WS
Hong Kong Six-monthly Report.....	26WS	Health Transformation Programme.....	32WS

# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 25 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>PRIME MINISTER</b> .....	5MC
Engagements.....	5MC

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**not later than  
Thursday 1 June 2023**

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## CONTENTS

**Thursday 25 May 2023**

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 409] [see index inside back page]**

*Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*  
*Attorney General*

**Net Migration Figures [Col. 431]**

*Answer to urgent question—(Robert Jenrick)*

**Business of the House [Col. 444]**

*Statement—(Penny Mordaunt)*

**Patient Choice [Col. 468]**

*Statement—(Steve Barclay)*

**New Hospitals [Col. 477]**

*Statement—(Steve Barclay)*

**Animal Welfare [Col. 494]**

*Statement—(Mark Spencer)*

**Backbench Business**

**Ukrainian Holodomor [Col. 504]**

*Motion—(Pauline Latham)—agreed to*

**Asylum Seeker Accommodation Off Wirral Peninsula [Col. 521]**

*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**

**Inshore Industry Fishing Crews: Visas [Col. 185WH]**

*General debate*

**Written Statements [Col. 23WS]**

**Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]**

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